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Interregional Project Networks in the light of European Integration

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Abstract

Due to the recent enlargements of the European Union, going along the path of uniform European integration has been challenged by a rising heterogeneity on all levels of governance – the European, the national and especially the subnational. Besides a structural heterogeneity, regarding the economic or political situation, a diversity of interests is observable among the member states. In order to continue the deepening of the integration process, a rising relevance of soft, non-binding EU-policy instruments as well as the trend towards more flexible and open policy instruments is detectable. This development is also linked with the question of legal competences on the level of the European Union. Taking the example of the European regional policy, the importance attached to interregional project cooperation illustrates the relevance of flexibility. Especially within the framework of the structural funds, heterogeneous actor groups - differentiated by spatial and institutional backgrounds as well as interests - cooperate on themes of mutual interest. Through these voluntary, multi-level projects, pan-European networks of spatially separated units are being constructed. Constantly new social knowledge spaces and arenas evolve throughout the European territory.

The projects of the EU regional policy have mainly been analyzed either in the light of the European studies (e.g. multi-level governance) or through the perspective of their implications for the European space (e.g. regionalism). In my dissertation project both existing strands of analysis shall be combined building on the concepts of spatially differentiated integration.

Theoretical Framework: Spatial Differentiation in the European integration process

Initially the process of European integration was built on the community method assuming that “all states would move together along the same integration path” (Majone 2010, p 17). Nevertheless, concepts of a more flexible European integration have gained in relevance resulting from various European governance crises where finding common solutions between all member states proved as being challenging – not all actors on the European level are capable and willing to further their level of integration.

De Neve summarises his findings on the current state of the process of integration by pointing out that

“the unit of analysis is mutating towards an evermore complex multiperspectival polity that (...) comprises more than the current twenty-seven EU member states, and no longer follows the erstwhile path of unified integration”(De Neve 2007, p 515).

Diverse terminologies have evolved around non-homogeneous integration- among others flexible integration, differentiated integration or Europe à la carte. All concepts have in common that they describe forms of integration that have a certain degree of adaptability to the challenges of rising heterogeneity within the community (Gstöhl 2004, p 147). These strands of European integration concepts pose the question of “who is willing and able to integrate”. Stubb (Stubb 1996) has defined three dimensions of differentiations: Time (Multi-Speed), Space (Variable Geometry) and Matter (à la Carte).

A differentiation by space describes the phenomena that spatially separated units within the European Union deepen their integration on an issue of common interest. This development is perceived as a consequence of the impossibility of finding common integration standards on the level of all member states. Main reasons are the heterogeneous interests as well as integration capacities. Also for the spatial differentiation several terminologies exists. Warleigh describes spatial differentiation as so called “concentric circles” (Warleigh 2002, p 10) which separate the EU member states into different levels of integration. A similar idea lies behind the concept of a Core Europe, which foresees the deepening of integration by a separated group of member states. One often cited example of a spatially differentiated integration is the establishment of the Schengen agreement which has been initiated by a group of member states. It is important to note that although there has been an active discussion on differentiated integration, the concept cannot be seen as a fully developed theory.

Rather it is an approach to categorise and systemize the developments that can be observed in the European reality by the implementation of more flexible policy instruments (e.g. Open Method of Coordination).

Looking at the empirical case of this paper - interregional projects within the EU's regional policy – a new perspective on spatial differentiation may be observed (Cappellin & Batey 1993): on a voluntary basis regions throughout Europe establish a joint project and intensively cooperate on an issue of common interest. Nevertheless, the concepts of differentiated integration have so far only been applied on the level of the member states. But from the point of view of regional studies interregional projects and their spatiality have been under investigation. Especially the role of interregional projects in the building of the European space has been an aspect of analysis. Several concepts have evolved to describe the new pan-European spaces established through project networks: “functionally separate trans-national arenas”, “European spaces of ideas”, “regional spaces of action” (Kohler-Koch 2002); “soft spaces”, “knowledge arenas” (Adams 2010). In the following an overview will be given on the different descriptions of the spatial implications of interregional projects.

Kohler-Koch introduces the term interaction space (Kohler-Koch 1998) which builds on the assumption that cross-border interaction as well as the rising functional differentiation of the society leads to a functional instead of territorial construction of political spaces as well as the drawing of functional borders – Kohler-Koch refers to them as “functionally separated trans-national arenas” (Kohler-Koch 2002, p 91). Also Blatter notes that increasing functional differentiation is taking place beyond boundaries (Blatter 2004, p 530). Knodt builds on this terminology describing the European Union as space of communication and interactions by elaborating that in the policy making between levels and territories the different actors of the European multi-level system create and define the European political space (Knodt 2002, p 16). Both Kohler-Koch and Knodt have introduced the notion of a marble cake instead of a layer cake for the European Union - a penetrated system of governance (Kohler-Koch 2002, p 91). Multiple types of actors are working together in networks within this penetrated system of governance (Kohler-Koch 2002, p 94). Krämer and König also builds on the assumption of functionally separated spaces by using the metaphor of a sandwich for describing the European Union – the layers of this sandwich are not as one might expect separated by territories but increasingly by functionally separated spaces with different spatial scope (Krämer &

König 2002, p 283). In the European policies they observe a delimitation regarding borders described as “(re)-definition of spaces within the European integration process along thematic and territorial characteristics” (Krämer & König 2002, p 280).

Gualini describes the policy areas of European regional policy as “new territorial governance arenas” (Gualini 2004, p 330) by arguing that institutional and governmental actors draw borders between “different interconnected policy arenas” (Gualini 2004, p 336). He goes on to describe these arenas as “informal, loosely institutionalized, network-like approaches” (Gualini 2004, p 338). Categorizing his findings, he defines three types of pattern of the spatiality of interaction arenas and settings: (1) regionalization of scale which is initiated from above, (2) regionalization of scope which describes policy- and project-based spaces for regional deliberation, (3) regionalization of networks/clubs which describe networks of territorial entities or actors tied by coordination efforts on a range of policy areas based on common interests and resources (Gualini 2004, pp 340–341).

Summing up, new spaces are constituted over multiple levels and increasingly on a rather functional instead of territorial basis. Those spaces overlap territorial borders as well as the thematic borders of the individual policy fields. Furthermore, project spaces reach across institutional borders. Through these processes new forms of interaction and cooperation are being established that may lead to innovative forms of governance (Krämer & König 2002, p 279; Kohler-Koch 1998).

Therefore, this paper aims at taking a new perspective on interregional project cooperation. The theoretical frame is based on the concepts of spatial differentiation in European integration studies. Nevertheless, the existing concepts are limited to the level of the member states. Therefore, a new perspective on the subnational level is taken by including the concepts on the construction of European spaces in the European regional policy. Consequently the networks of interregional projects are analyzed under the light of their spatiality. The conclusions are then reflected with the existing concepts of differentiated integration.

Interregional project networks in European regional policy

Interregional Project Cooperation is one of the central instruments of the European Union's regional policy. Interregional projects are projects that include partners from at minimum two regions that are not transnational regions meaning that they do not have a common border. As policy instrument the interregional cooperation projects can be described as "new, non-binding forms of EU policy making and integration which signal the emergence of a new mode of governance through 'facilitated coordination' alongside the traditional governance by hierarchy which characterized the 'Community Method' of regulation." (Colomb 2007, pp 350–351). As Faludi observes, "from the above, it is clear that cooperation is seen as a means to an end: harmonious and balanced European integration." (Faludi 2008, p 5). Through these instruments the European Commission encourages bottom-up initiative, fostering the creation of interregional networks but also fostering intraregional networks within the regions (Ansell 2002, p 320).

A leading role in the design and implementation of interregional cooperation as soft governance instrument – based on voluntary partnership – can be attributed to the European Cohesion policy and the structural funds. Although not being directly part of the Treaty of Rome, addressing the disparities of regions within the European Union has been a long-standing policy objective ever since. Nevertheless, somehow the supranational integration and the subnational diversification have been perceived as simultaneous development processes but as independent from each other (Börzel 2002, p 123). As one central step the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) has been established in the 1970s with the objective of attributing funding to European regions. Through the structural funds – with one them being the ERDF – the understanding of funds as sole reimbursement system for national actions changed into the objective of commonly approaching the sectorial and territorial disparities within the European multi-level system (Heinelt & Malek 2002, p 72). With the ratification of the Single European Act in 1988 the European regional policy gained a basis in the treaty. Accompanied by the establishment of a Directorate General within the European Commission the regional policy has continued to gain in importance (Faludi & Waterhout 2002). The European regional policy is divided into three objectives: convergence, regional competitiveness and employment as well as European territorial cooperation under which the European Regional Development Fund is being implemented.

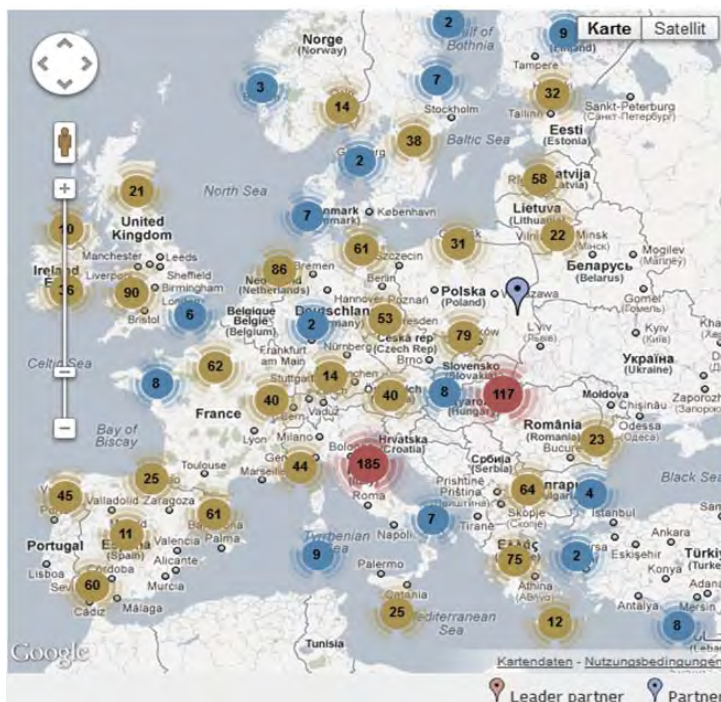
One specific example of a project-based policy implementation instrument is the programme INTERREG – a programme which enables cooperation between European regions. From a European point of view, the objective of INTERREG is to promote an European added-value - "(...) projects funded under INTERREG should focus on actions that member states and regions would not otherwise undertake" (Dühr, Colomb & Nadin 2010, p 234).

Under the financing scheme of INTERREG projects are being established around a topic of mutual interest, this can either be a 'transnational topic', a topic which cannot be addressed without transnational cooperation or a 'common topic' which is defined as "a shared concern of local or regional importance that can benefit from cooperation but does not necessarily require it" (Dühr, Colomb & Nadin 2010, p 237). The main characteristics of INTERREG-programmes are that they involve "voluntary, multilateral processes of cooperation, exchange and learning running over several years between various types of actors mainly at sub-central levels of government" (Colomb 2007, p 350). Those voluntary cooperation possibilities are of importance for the deepening of European integration as most policy areas that are covered by INTERREG - such as research or environmental policy - are not part of the community competences (Görmar 2005). Regarding the eligible partners, INTERREG seeks an institutional differentiation by inviting public authorities as well as research institutes and universities as well as regional agencies with different thematical foci.

Therefore INTERREG can be seen as a multi-level instrument designed for approaching actors from various European governance levels - European, national and sub-national. In general, the INTERREG-programmes exemplify that the European Union has taken on a network strategy "built around the concept of planning and operational partnership between the EU, national governments, and the regions" (Ansell 2002, p 318). One main characteristic of networks is that horizontal and not hierarchical relations dominate the interaction structure – this distinguishes networks from hierarchies. In his study Blatter concludes that the studied INTERREG-projects can be perceived as networks as their interaction structure is characterized by flat interactions and only to a minor part by vertical interactions (Blatter 2002, p 266). It can be summarized that INTERREG encourages sub-national actors to co-operate and form "multi-level networks that increase territorial development through state borders" (Harguindéguy 2007, p 317).

The INTERREG programme is divided in an A, B and C strand with different spatial limitations. The strand under analysis in this paper is INTERREG IVC. The programme INTERREG IVC, being financed under the European Regional Development Fund, enables and supports interregional cooperation between non-neighboring European regions. The basic characteristic of INTERREG IVC is that it follows a bottom-up approach meaning that the project teams are formed through voluntary initiatives established on the regional level. The INTERREG IVC programme is built around two thematic priorities based on the objectives of the Lisbon and Gothenburg Strategies: on the one hand innovation and the knowledge economy, on the other hand environment and risk prevention. In comparison to other programmes of the European regional policy, the INTERREG IVC programme is focused on exchange and transfer of experiences – meaning that rather soft modes of interregional learning are supported instead of hard infrastructure investments. The exchange takes place through content-related workshops, study visits or staff exchange. Therefore, the effects remain somehow indirect, “cognitive changes of actors involved in these cooperation networks” (Dühr & Nadin 2007, p 376).

Figure 1: Lead Partners (red) and project partners (blue) involved in INTERREG IVC projects



Source: INTERREG IVC 2012

The design of the INTERREG IVC programme enables project-related cooperation between actors with different institutional backgrounds as well as from different levels of the European governance system. As illustrated in figure 1, the project networks constituted by one lead partner and project partners from different regions span over the European territory. Interregional projects have been observed from various theoretical and methodological angles. The approach taken in this chapter is to observe the interactions within one selected case study of an INTERREG IVC project and to reflect them with the theoretical frame – the combination of spatial differentiation in the integration process and the social construction of pan-European spaces. The results have been gathered from observations, document analysis and discussions with the participants.

The Case Study – INTERREG IVC project Know-Man

The selected case study of this paper as well as of my dissertation project is the INTERREG IVC project “Know-Man: Knowledge Network Management in Technology Parks” established under the priority Innovation and the Knowledge Economy. Know-Man improves regional development and spatial innovation policies by exchanging and transferring regional approaches, competencies and instruments of knowledge network management to strengthen the regions’ global competitiveness. Knowledge Management instruments are implemented to identify and connect regional cross-sectoral and cross-institutional knowledge potentials within the participating regions. The project team of Know-Man is composed of 15 regional partners coming from six European regions. These regions are Andalusia (Spain), Berlin-Brandenburg (Germany), Koroska (Slovenia), Lower Silesia (Poland), Rome and Veneto (Italy). The partnership was put together with respect to the triple-helix of regional actors. Know-Man is an ongoing project with a duration of three years ending in December 2012.

The differentiated project structure becomes observable on different levels of analysis. First the network covers six spatially separated regions all over the European territory with very different structures as well as interest constellations. Furthermore, the fifteen actors themselves have different institutional backgrounds – adding to heterogeneous perspectives, interests and roles. In the case of Know-Man the project members are

public authorities, regional development agencies, research institutes and management authorities of technology parks.

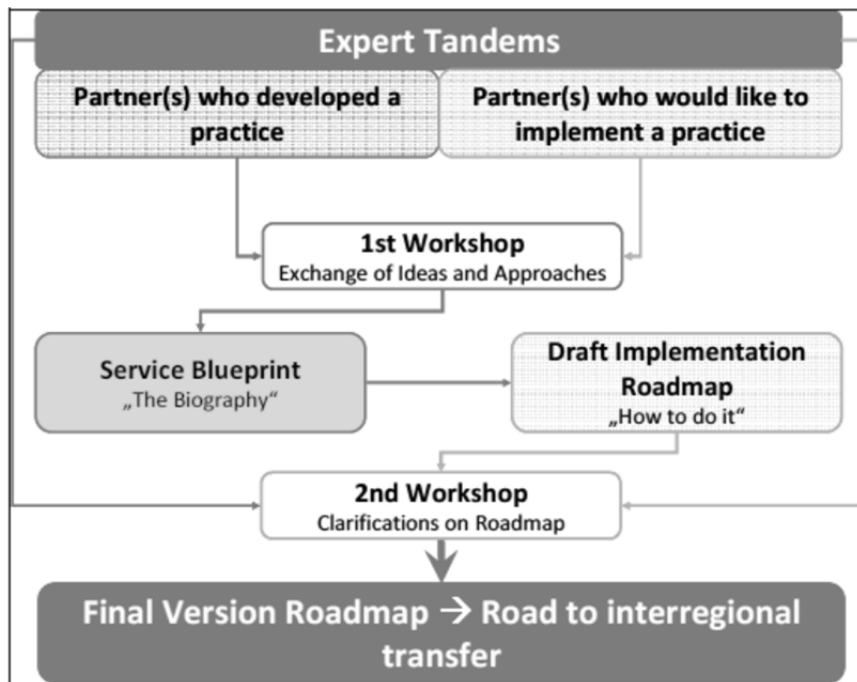
In general the exchange and transfer of knowledge should take place through workshops, study visits, staff exchange as well as specifically designed instruments. One concrete example of intense interregional cooperation on a topic of mutual interest are so-called expert tandems. In the following chapter the methodology of the expert tandems as well as one specific example will be described and reflected with the theoretical framework.

Know-Man Expert Tandems

Within the INTERREG IVC project “Know-Man” an intense net of interactions is spanning between the fifteen partners in six European regions. As one instrument expert tandems have been developed for allowing a deepening of interaction on an issue of mutual interest. Expert Tandems are small working groups of consisting of at the minimum two project partners organizing together the transfer of a practice from one region to another. Preceding the transfer, the partnership identified and described good practices. Good Practices are initiatives, practices or policies that have proven success in one region. Each tandem is surrounded around one selected good practice which is being transferred from the implementing project region to the region which is interesting in transferring it. As the theme of Know-Man is the cooperation between the science and the business world, all Good Practices surround the topic of cooperation between those spheres.

Within Know-Man six expert tandems have been established, the size of the tandems range from one-on-one tandems with two members to group tandems with up to four project partners. On a voluntary basis, actors in different regions are exchanging and deepening knowledge on a tool or policy as well as working on its actual transfer. Through formalized steps such as a written handbook for the chosen practice and an implementation roadmap for the transfer, the knowledge on the practice shall be made transferable. Nevertheless, meetings on location are necessary to learn about the regional context in order to adapt and adjust the practice accordingly.

Figure 2: Methodology of the Know-Man Expert Tandems



Source: Boeso et al. 2011

To organize the establishment of the intra-project networks a methodology has been developed which consists of multiple steps:

As a first step a workshop has been organized at the project level where the fifteen project partners voluntary decided which tandems they are interested in establishing. Partners were able to select from the in a previous step defined good practices implemented in the six project regions. In a second step, a first meeting took place between the partners constituting the tandem including other relevant stakeholders who work together on the practice. In this meeting the “donating” partner presented the selected practice and its regional context to the “receiving” partner. As a third step, a so-called service blueprint was written for each practice. This service blueprint is somewhat the biography of the practice and contains its development, its implementation and all surrounding issues such as financing and marketing. Furthermore the description is complemented by a time plan. This document is to be prepared by the “donating” partner and sent to the “receiving” partner. As step four based on this first exchange, a second personal meeting between the tandem partners took place in the receiving region. The objective of this second personal meeting was to prepare the transfer of the practice in

the receiving region. Therefore the involvement of further stakeholders later involved in the implementation process in the region was necessary in this meeting. As a fifth step, a document – the so-called implementation roadmap – was prepared by the receiving partner. This roadmap contains the description of the planned implementation of the practice in the receiving region.

In total six tandems have been established within Know-Man. To showcase the implementation of this methodology the expert Transfer Café which is being carried out between partners from Berlin and Rom will be described in more detail. The Transfer Café is an online platform for start-ups in Berlin where questions on technology-related issues can be posed to experts in the regions. As the metropolitan region of Rome has been lacking a functional online network on research-based topics (such as a register of research institutions and researchers), a transfer of the practice between the two regions – represented through the public authorities as well as through technology agents – has been agreed on. The expert tandem Transfer Café has been following the above described methodology. Taking this example, the relevant aspects of these intra-project networks are being explained in the following sections.

Lesson's learned from the Expert Tandem Transfer Café

As the work on the expert tandem is still ongoing until the end of 2012, this chapter highlights two preliminary findings on the cooperation – the fostering of inter-institutional cooperation as well as the importance of the regional context.

The expert tandem on the Transfer Café has been established based on the voluntary cooperation initiative by both regions articulated within the first workshop. The partners from Berlin were willing to share their experience whereas the partners from Rome were interested in transferring the practice based on their regional needs. Nevertheless, after the expression of interest, the expert tandem had to be extended to further regional actors as the implementation agency of the Transfer Café in Berlin is not member of the Know-Man team. The same applies for the receiving region where a network for the implementation of the practice had to be established. Therefore a core team of the tandem was established by three Know-Man partners (the public authority from Berlin, the public authority from Rome as well as the business promotion agency of Rome). Furthermore a surrounding network was established with the technology agency of

Berlin, which has developed and is implementing the practice as well as a university and a technology park management in Rome who will implement the transferred practice on their website. Those actors are characterized by different institutional backgrounds meaning that public authorities as well as technology-related actors each have their specific tasks and responsibilities as well as interests. While the public authorities were important for ensuring the regional acceptance and communication, the technology actors are in stronger contact with the actual target group and are better informed on their actual needs. Including those wider actor groups from the beginning proved as being of crucial importance for adapting the practice to the actual needs within the region.

The obvious form of spatial differentiation is that donating and receiving partner are situated in different regions - in this case Rome and Berlin - and confronted with different regional context situations. Taking the example of the Transfer Café, during the second meeting it became visible that for the transfer a more general approach needed to be fostered as the metropolitan region of Rome experienced a demand for “knowing who knows what” especially in research. While the original Transfer Café in Berlin was developed for a rather narrow target group – technology-intense start-up seeking assistance in their field of technology – a wider approach was adapted for Rome. Precisely this means that the Transfer Café in Rome will be a more general register of researchers in the area with the objective of supporting cooperation between them. It has to be noted that these adaptations were a result of the two exchange workshops, one in each region, and the developed documents functioning as a biography of the practice. This findings support the importance of constant exchange- either through personal meetings or through the exchange of documents.

Finally, it should be pointed out that by including the regional authority in Rome, the findings and work on the tandem will be included in the innovation policy of Rome. A continuation of the exchange process after the end of the Know-Man project is foreseen by both regions.

Summing up – spatial differentiation and subnational integration

This example of the expert tandems within Know-Man serves as one illustration of the intense network of interactions spanning on the subnational level. It highlights that

regional actors cooperate on a voluntary basis on a topic being of interest to them. Although this interaction takes place on the horizontal level of the regions, the European level plays a role in this exchange by developing the framework of the INTERREG programme and precisely by defining the topics of the project cooperation. There the European level functions as a kind of topic setter by defining the programme and selecting the projects for implementation. Those topics are often not directly covered by the competence of the European Union – in this case policies covered are mainly regional economic development policies. Blatter even refers to the effects of INTERREG as “micro-integration” (Blatter 2002, p 274) which supports the stability and legitimation of European integration. The micro-integration is closely coupled to the supranational macro-integration process that plays a major role for initiating and implementing the cooperation programmes (Blatter 2002, p 263).

Coming back to the issue of differentiated integration – surrounding the question of who is willing and able to cooperate - various aspects are observable in interregional projects. Interregional projects – for example the INTERREG-programmes – enable voluntary cooperation of different actors wishing to deepen the exchange on a specific topic of mutual interest. The example of the expert tandems shows that instruments are in place that foster intense interaction structures between the partners of a project as well as including further relevant partners. This exemplary instrument supports the establishment of intra-project networks with the aim of actually organizing the flow of knowledge from one region to another. Therefore the network partners establish a kind of common knowledge space – however this might be called - “European spaces of ideas”, “spaces of action” (Kohler-Koch 2002).; “soft spaces”, “knowledge arenas” {Adams 2010}.

It can be summarized that on the subnational level interactions and knowledge flows are taking place through interregional projects that contribute to the process of European integration. As Jeffrey points out: “European integration policy has (...) been viewed as a central state monopoly. (...) it is to suggest that a central state monopoly over European policy in a climate of a deeper European integration and growing sub-national mobilization is unsustainable and liable to be breached. The maintenance of such a monopoly would presuppose that it is possible to exclude sub-national actors from European policy-making processes (...) This is not the case” (Jeffrey 2000, p 5).

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