European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation: a means to harden spatially dispersed cooperation?

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ABSTRACT
In the past decade, over 60 European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) have emerged, which are intended to help institutionalize cross-border cooperation. This paper analyses how establishing an EGTC contributes to the institutional ‘hardening’ of the spatially dispersed variant of cross-border cooperations and examines the attendant challenges. The research seeks to contribute to current debates concerning ‘soft spaces’ and makes the case that EGTCs represent a flexible tool for the hardening of spatially dispersed cross-border cooperations.

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INTRODUCTION
National territories are often too small to handle complex trends and challenges such as those associated with globalization. This led to Europe-wide debates on governance styles and transnational policy documents such as the Territorial Agenda of the European Union (Informal Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion, 2007). Additionally, the European Union (EU) has encouraged regions to cooperate across borders, including through transnational and interregional cooperation programmes, comprising both territorially contiguous and spatially dispersed areas.

Cross-border cooperations (CBCs) are a voluntary mechanism for the development of common strategies, which often utilize flexible structures. However, different national regulations and competencies can hamper the implementation of joint objectives (Gärditz, 2009; Ricq, 2006). This situation resulted in an increased demand for legal recognition and institutionalization of CBCs. In 2007, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) was introduced to manage CBCs as multilateral institutional bodies with legal personality and, thereby, reduce the challenges of cooperation. EGTCs were designed to be capable of taking binding decisions and to stabilize or ‘harden’ longer-term collaboration. EGTCs typically manage funds on behalf of their international members and have a dedicated team of staff. By July 2016, 63 EGTCs had been established as well as others at different stages of development.

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In this paper, CBCs are conceptualized as ‘soft spaces’ of governance (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009; Allmendinger, Haughton, Knieling, & Othengrafen, 2015; Walsh, Jacuniak-Suda, Knieling, & Othengrafen, 2012), notable for their flexible territorial configurations that transect national administrative borders. They are intended to cope with manifold common challenges, such as congested cross-border transport networks. Recent research has demonstrated how some soft spaces ‘harden’ institutionally, i.e., increase their independence from the national level and gain enhanced powers (Othengrafen, Knieling, Haughton, & Allmendinger, 2015). This paper investigates this process of hardening through the case of network-EGTCs, which are cooperative arrangements between spatially dispersed areas. Pursuing this line of investigation, first contemporary debates on soft spaces and their tendencies to harden are critically reviewed. Then an overview of the research is provided, which analyses seven network-EGTCs and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of their establishment are presented. The conclusion discusses the significance of EGTCs with respect to previous cooperation challenges and argues that EGTCs can represent a flexible tool for spatially dispersed CBCs to harden their institutional arrangements, whilst maintaining a soft and mutable cooperation space.

**HARDENING OF SOFT SPACES THROUGH EGTCs?**

‘Soft spaces’ are a form of governance that cross formal administrative and territorial boundaries (Walsh, 2015). Complementing existing administrative spaces, they can be an impetus for experimental spatial development ideas. These, however, need to be implemented by the administrative ‘hard’ level in order to become effective (Haughton, Allmendinger, Counsell, & Vigar, 2010).

CBCs can be seen as a particular form of ‘soft space’ as they include selected European entities and, thereby, are also faced with overcoming national boundaries and competence frames. Particularly territorially dispersed CBCs consist of a non-contiguous network of European territories. As institutional spaces, CBCs are intended to unite territories and citizens that face common challenges or interests in manifold thematic fields. Through voluntary participation in CBCs, partners are anticipated to benefit from knowledge-exchange exercises. Independent from national formal and bureaucratic processes they are expected to experiment in searching for common strategies and solutions to shared problems. The implementation of these strategies and solutions, however, has to be realized within the national frameworks of the formal administrative spaces as the domestic authorities remain the competent bodies. Each country decides about the implementation details within an individual bureaucratic process. Therefore, the outcome can differ from the CBC’s strategic objectives. This has often led to dissatisfaction and to the demand to delegate more power to CBCs.

While some ‘soft spaces’ prefer keeping their informal structure, others exhibit hardening processes (Metzger & Schmitt, 2012): the actors involved in soft spaces have sought to establish a more formalized institutional structure to make implementation more effective and to become more independent from the national levels (Othengrafen et al., 2015). These hardening attempts, however, contradict the original idea of flexible CBCs.

The introduction of EGTCs as a governance instrument in 2006 made it possible legally to institutionalize CBCs in combination with additional competences. Thus, EGTCs were welcomed with high expectations such as a higher stability, continuation and further intensification of the CBC as well as a higher liability of taken decisions. Furthermore, CBCs hoped to gain a higher visibility and to prevail in competition with other CBCs (Caesar, 2015).

EGTC’s formally define the spatial scope of their cooperation. Together with the cooperation’s legal formalization and its gaining of competences, this speaks to the initiation of a hardening process of the CBC facilitated by the EU. As EGTCs are applicable in manifold ways – they can consist of members from different public administrative levels and from at least two different EU member states, and can implement various tasks and purposes – under the premise of contributing
to territorial cooperation and European cohesion (European Parliament & Council, 2014), they seem to leave the cooperation some flexibility, despite the hardening of the structure. Therefore, are EGTCs a panacea for CBC challenges?

**ARE EGTCs A PANACEA FOR CBC CHALLENGES?**

The empirical section of the paper seeks to analyse the influence of EGTCs in addressing the challenge of cooperating across diverse geographies. It is derived from comparative research of a sample of seven CBCs that considered establishing or had already established a network-EGTC (Table 1). Elite interviews – either face to face or by telephone – were conducted with relevant actors. In addition to a general overview of the seven CBCs, more detailed case analysis of the Amphictyony EGTC is provided.

Each case involves participants from at least three member states. Partners are not concentrated in one territory, such as a border area, but are more geographically dispersed. Thus, they are distinct from ‘traditional’ CBCs.

All network-EGTCs are based on a history of cooperation, such as a network of twinned cities, working communities and intergovernmental organizations. In three cases, EU-funded INTERREG projects brought the members together (Table 2). The CBCs were established to express and promote common needs and developments or contribute to research and learning. Almost all analysed CBCs decided to establish an EGTC due to legal powers and related benefits (e.g., access to EU funds and projects, manage membership fees etc.) (Table 3). Higher visibility of the cooperation at the EU level was also an important rationale. Three of the seven cooperations were concerned with stabilizing relationships, among others, because of their spatially loose structure. For Amphictyony, a driver was the need for joint decision-making. The three CBCs derived from the INTERREG projects sought to continue and enrich existing cooperation. In addition, some CBCs chose the EGTC to improve their competitiveness. This reasoning goes hand in hand with the arguments for the ‘hardening’ of ‘soft spaces’ identified by Metzger and Schmitt (2012) and Othengrafen et al. (2015). These aims cannot be guaranteed by the flexible ‘soft’ CBC spaces – and, thus, show the clear will of the CBCs to ‘harden’.

The establishment time of the EGTC varied among the cases from under one year to more than five years (Table 2). The INTERREG projects decided to establish an EGTC during their project application. One of them discontinued the establishment process because of the perceived complexity and expense associated with an EGTC structure. Thus, it might be premature to assume that all INTERREG CBCs are a suitable basis for establishing an EGTC.

Amphictyony, an experienced cooperation, established the EGTC within one year. At that time most EU member states had not implemented the EGTC regulation and their national

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**Table 1. Network-EGTC case studies.**

| Number | Name                | Seat’s location     | Member states involved | Foundation        |
|--------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| 1      | Amphictyony         | Athens, Greece      | CY, FR, GR, IT         | December 2008     |
| 2      | ARCHIMED            | Taormina, Italy     | CY, ES, IT             | March 2011        |
| 3      | EUKN                | The Hague, the      | BE, CY, CZ, DE, FR,    | December 2012     |
|        |                     | Netherlands         | HU, LUX, NL, RO        |                   |
| 4      | CETC                | Szczecin, Poland    | HU, PL, SE, HR         | April 2014        |
| 5      | Rhine-Alpine        | Mannheim, Germany   | DE, IT, NL             | April 2015        |
| 6      | MED TECHNOPOLIS     | Malaga, Spain       | ES, FR, GR, IT, PT     | Discontinued      |
| 7      | LONGLIFE            | Berlin, Germany     | DE, DK, LIT, PL        | No information available |

Source: Author, 2017, based on Caesar (2015).
provisions. Therefore, the cooperation members had to lobby to accelerate the adoption of the national legislations. In the light of these circumstances, the establishment process was very fast. The spatially dispersed nature of the Amphictyony EGTC was not deemed to be a major hindrance. Instead, according to one respondent, this challenge was adopted 'as a strengthening and unifying factor [...] to intensify the political work' (personal communication, 23 May 2012).

Table 2 and Figure 1 show the diversity of involvement of cooperation members from different administrative levels, which has an impact on the variety of the spatial configuration of network-EGTCs. For example, whereas the European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN) involves national agencies and, thus, covers the whole territory of member states, Amphictyony involves several small-scale local actors that are dispersed throughout a number of islands and mainland Europe. Although the spatial scope of network-EGTCs is clearly defined in their convention, it can be extended when new members join. Thus, it remains flexible despite the CBCs' institutional hardening.

All network-EGTCs with the exception of LONGLIFE relate their aims to a particular territorial unit. For example, MED TECHNOPOLIS and Amphictyony want to contribute to the Mediterranean region, ARCHIMED to certain islands, and CETC as well as Rhine-Alpine want to strengthen transport corridor axes, whereas the EUKN focuses on EU cities in general. Thus, spatially dispersed network-EGTCs tendentially relate their aims to particular territorial configurations.

Due to the vast territorial dispersion of network-EGTCs’ members, the probability of sharing mutual language competences is lower than in cross-border EGTCs. Network-EGTCs usually introduce one intermediary working language but sometimes keep all official languages of their members for communication. The research found that lack of agreement on a single working language can complicate communication and hinder cooperation. Such a challenge should, therefore, not be assumed to be solved by the establishment of an EGTC.

The EGTCs administrate the membership fees of the CBCs’ international members and fund their activities. Some groupings envisage receiving additional funds from EU grants (Table 2).

### Table 2. Characteristics of the network-EGTCs.

| Name          | Members | Basis                        | Financing                                      | Establishment time |
|---------------|---------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Amphictyony   | 57 local | City network                 | Membership fees and European Union grants     | 11 months          |
| ARCHIMED      | 5 regional, 1 national, 1 university | Working communities | Membership fees | Unclear            |
| EUKN          | 9 national | Intergovernmental organization | Membership fees | 12 months          |
| CETC Rhine-Alpine | 8 regional, 7 regional, 3 local, 3 infrastructure providers | Transport initiative INTERREG project | Membership fees and European Union grants | 47 months, 65 months |
| MED TECHNOPOLIS | Local, Regional, National, Universities, Research centres | INTERREG project | cancelled       |
| LONGLIFE      | Local Universities, Research centres | INTERREG project | Since 03/2011   |

Source: Author, 2017, based on Caesar (2015).
Table 3. Establishment reasons of the network-EGTCs.

| Reasons       | Amphictyony | ARCHIMED | EUKN | CETC | Rhine-Alpine | MED TECHNOPLUS | LONGLIFE |
|---------------|-------------|----------|------|------|--------------|----------------|----------|
| Legal nature  | ×           | ×        | ×    | ×    | ×            | ×              | ×        |
| Visibility    | ×           | ×        | ×    | ×    | ×            | ×              | ×        |
| Stability     | ×           |          | ×    |      |              |                | ×        |
| Liability     | ×           |          |      |      |              |                |          |
| Intensification| ×           |          |      |      |              |                |          |
| Competition   | ×           | ×        |      |      |              |                | ×        |
| Continuation  | ×           |          |      |      |              |                | ×        |

Source: Author, 2017, based on Caesar (2015).
This underlines the legitimacy of CBCs in terms of financial management after the EGTC establishment. The analysed network-EGTCs fulfil both representative and administrative tasks. Often they also facilitate the exchange of experiences and are responsible for the implementation of joint decisions. This mirrors the aims of CBCs. As EGTCs can appoint their own staff, the cooperation members’ manpower is complemented and the cooperation can become more active, which might be of added value for the implementation of common aims.

Looking back to the initial aims of the Amphictyony EGTC, several expected advantages of the EGTC model have materialized, but not all, as illustrated in Table 4. The legal nature of the tool was considered to be useful in practice in terms of administration and mutual communication. Nevertheless, the visibility of cooperation has only marginally increased. However, according to one interviewee, cooperation has got a stronger political and economic power (personal communication, 23 May 2012). This can be deemed to be an important factor for the ‘hardening’ of the cooperation.

Furthermore, the cooperation has become more stable since the establishment of the EGTC. Yet, it is still influenced negatively in its composition and its concrete orientation by current
political and personal changes. The cooperation’s existence, however, is guaranteed for at least 25 years. Hence, the establishment of an EGTC would appear to design longevity. Other positive effects identified by the CBC in practice are a faster decision-making process compared with the time needed in the previous cooperation structure and more effective implementation due to its legal nature. The implementation of decisions has been a central challenge for several CBCs and shows that the ‘hardening’ through an EGTC has benefits.

CONCLUSIONS

The creation of new flexible administrative ‘soft spaces’ as arenas of exchange and cooperation was of central importance for tackling transnational issues, such as cross-border transportation. Nevertheless, the soft nature of some CBCs has hindered implementation ambitions. Therefore, these CBCs wanted to institutionalize their cooperation space – the same space that had been created with high efforts to be ‘soft’, flexible and non-bureaucratic some years previously.

For this reason, EGTCs were introduced as a tool for CBCs to institutionalize their cooperation voluntarily and harden their structures. This paper presented seven distinct territorially dispersed CBCs that had already established or considered establishing an EGTC due to different reasons – particularly the EGTC’s legal nature and expected visibility benefits. Two CBCs have not implemented this idea into practice so far.

The case of Amphictyony shows that establishing an EGTC is not a panacea for all difficulties of cooperation experienced previously: EGTCs offer several opportunities for ‘soft’ spatially dispersed CBCs such as additional competences, higher obligations for implementation and stability, which can often help to overcome some challenges. However, EGTCs are obliged to exist for a fixed duration and create new bureaucratic challenges. Also, language difficulties and the dependence on political personal changes can persist. Of note, the demanding and often lengthy process of establishing EGTCs contrasts with the flexibility of CBCs.

Walsh (2015) argued that ‘soft spaces’ kept a strong territorial relation and could not be reduced to non-territorial, purely organizational structures. The interesting trait of EGTCs is that they formally harden the cooperation structure, but remain territorially flexible (‘soft’) spaces: they allow CBCs to extend their territory and membership after the formal definition of the cooperation area. Thus, EGTCs prove to be a flexible tool to harden CBCs because – as paradoxical as this may seem – they maintain a rather soft and alterable cooperation space.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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