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## **The institutionalization of mountain regions in Europe**

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**Abstract:** Since the 1990s, many 'project regions' have emerged in Europe, a trend deriving from the tendency to adopt ad hoc institutions for specific spatial and environmental issues and the empowerment of diverse stakeholders who compete with the dominant role of States. This article addresses the building of institutionalized mountain regions in Europe, analysing how the specificity of mountain areas was considered in policies by States and the European Union, and later for transnational mountain ranges. Environmental and transboundary issues have been major driving forces for new institutional arrangements combining a territorial and environmental focus and complex networks of stakeholders.

**Key words:** Europe, mountains, institutions, Conventions, project regions, rescaling

**Résumé :** Depuis les années 1990, de nombreuses "régions de projet", chacune conçue en fonction de problèmes ou d'enjeux spécifiques, ont été institutionnalisées en Europe. Cette tendance découle de la propension croissante des acteurs à mettre sur pied des institutions ad hoc pour traiter d'enjeux spatiaux et environnementaux en donnant une marge d'initiative accrue à des parties prenantes qui parfois concurrencent les institutions étatiques dans ces domaines. Cet article porte sur la mise en place d'institutions de gouvernance transnationale pour des régions de montagne en Europe; il analyse comment le spécificité des régions de montagne a été conçue et prise en compte dans les politiques publiques, d'abord à l'échelle de quelques Etats et de l'Union Européenne, puis à l'échelle de chaînes de montagnes transnationales. Dans ce contexte, les enjeux environnementaux et transfrontaliers ont été des moteurs décisifs

dans la mise en place d'arrangements institutionnels combinant un cadrage territorial et environnemental et des réseaux complexes d'acteurs hétérogènes.

Mots-clefs : Europe, montagnes, institutions, conventions, régions de projet, rescaling

Zusammenfassung: Seit den 1990er Jahren entstanden in Europe zahlreiche 'Projektregionen', ein Trend, der von der Tendenz ausging, Ad-Hoc-Institutionen für die Behandlung spezifischer räumlich-ökologischer Probleme einzurichten, sowie diverse, mit der vorherrschenden Macht des Staates konkurrenzierende Interessengruppen zu befähigen. Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit dem Erstellungsprozess von institutionalisierten Bergregionen in Europe. Er analysiert die Berücksichtigung der Eigenheit von Bergregionen, zunächst in staatlicher und europäischer Politik, und später in grenzübergreifenden Kontexten. Er zeigt auch auf, dass ökologische und grenzübergreifende Problem eine wichtige Triebkraft für die Entstehung von neuen institutionellen Modalitäten sind, die einen territorialen und ökologischen Fokus mit komplexen Akteurnetzwerken verbinden.

Europa, Berge, Institutionen, Abkommen, Projektregionen, Rescaling

## **Introduction**

Since the 1980s, an active academic debate in the social sciences has fundamentally renewed the ways in which scientists refer to the notion of region. Ushering in the constructivist turn, these debates powerfully and permanently undermined predominant realist and positivist epistemologies that regarded regions as objective, hierarchically nested levels of spatial organization. By contrast, competing views called for regions to be studied from the perspective of how human agency shapes their making and positioning in scalar arrangements. Constructivist scholars, especially in human geography, have since suggested the need to question how actors “imagine and identify a discrete, bounded space characterized by a shared understanding of the opportunities or problems that are motivating the very nature of political action” (JONES and MACLEOD, 2004: 437). As a consequence, such scholars have reinterpreted the notion of scale as a category of practice shaped by scientific, institutional, or political objectives, rather than as a category of analysis, and urged researchers to focus on the “scalar practices of social actors” (MOORE, 2008: 212), “rather than practices occurring at different scales” (MANSFIELD, 2005: 468). Therefore, regions are nowadays widely

understood as “assembled and connected in historically contingent ways in cultural, economic, and political contexts and struggles” (PAASI, 2010: 2298).

This article examines the implications of an actor-oriented constructivist view of regions and scale with regard to the institutionalization of European mountains and mountain ranges (“massifs” in the parlance of the European Union [EU]) as a particular form of regional territory. In so doing, the article makes three distinct contributions. First, it contextualizes the constructivist turn in the context of the emergence of ‘project regions’: more or less bounded entities, created by actors to address specific (often environmental) problems; they are distinct from, yet often articulate with ‘constitutional regions’ that represent jurisdictionally defined sub-national levels of state organization. The article suggests that the temporally and spatially fluid nature of project regions, such as transboundary mountain regions, renders the institutionalization of transboundary mountain regions more contested and thus less stable. Second, the article adopts an actor-oriented approach to trace the construction of European mountain regions from the early twentieth century, with a focus on recent transnational rescaling. In highlighting the diversity of local, national, and international protagonists, it provides support to a relational view of regions in which influential actors—especially international governmental organizations (IGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—need not be *of/from* a mountain region in order to be influential *in* it. Moreover, it reveals the important, yet far from hegemonic, role of scientific expertise in region building. Finally, the article demonstrates, for European mountain regions, how the last three decades witnessed a steady but uneven emergence of a particular form of regional territory which relates in various ways to the state-oriented, hierarchical scalar system and thus gives rise to different forms of governance.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section critically reviews the co-evolution of constructivist perspectives and project regions from an actor-oriented perspective. The following sections trace the institutionalization of European mountain regions from their domestic and single-sector origins to their current transboundary and multi-sectoral scope. Insights from recent efforts to develop a massif-wide initiative in South-East Europe then highlight the limits of the massif model. The conclusion returns to the role of human agency in region-building.

### **Project regions in the constructivist turn**

The changing conceptualization of regions has created a lasting impact not only on the study of entities below, above and across the level of states, but also on the very logic of situating regions in scalar systems. Over the last few decades, Europe has witnessed the creation of a great variety of project regions, many including mountainous areas.

Importantly, many of these project regions emerged in cross-border regions, sometimes at the initiative of, and with support from, the EU, and typically coordinated by, and delineated on the basis of, sub-national constitutional regions. Some project regions have been driven by IGOs or NGOs interested in the spatial perimeters of environmental systems such as watershed management, river basin planning, or ecosystem conservation and thus less directly, or not at all, linked to constitutional regions. As further elaborated below, the prominent role played by constitutional regions in EU-driven initiatives, compared with their lack of involvement in IGO/NGO-driven environmental initiatives, generates two different forms of transboundary mountain region governance; moreover, science-based justifications tend to be less significant in the former than in the latter.

The construction of project regions is contentious because they may overlap and because diverse actors may pursue competing objectives. Against this background, this section seeks to engage recent scholarly work on regions and scale with a focus on generating a theoretical basis for understanding the institutionalization of mountain regions in Europe.

The constructivist turn has been fruitfully applied to constitutional regions, the intermediate level of state organizations such as German and Austrian *Länder*, Italian *regione*, Spanish *Comunidades Autónomas*, French *Régions* (PAASI, 2010). However, it seems especially relevant for understanding the construction of project regions, comparable to 'unusual' or 'non-standard' regions (DEAS and LORD, 2006): specific entities designed to address a type of problem or need and, hence, identify *ad hoc* solutions, institutionalized according to specialized rules at the national or international level. Examples include the *Regio Basiliensis* (SOHN *et al.*, 2009) and metropolitan regions in Germany (HARRISON, 2010). While this article focuses on project regions, their frequent articulation with constitutional regions makes it necessary to consider the importance of the latter in the shaping and implementation of the former.

For project regions, several scholars have argued that actor-oriented approaches are particularly useful for understanding the decisive role of networked, collaborative practices between various types of stakeholders (e.g. MASSEY, 1999). Project regions derive from complex networks of stakeholders. Their analysis requires a shift from territorially-embedded to relational and unbounded conceptions of regions (AMIN, 2004) since many stakeholders are external to the region of concern (e.g. ALLEN and COCHRANE, 2007). Nevertheless, many observers have shown that a relational view of region building must also build on a clear understanding of the role of inherited territorial entities (HUDSON, 2007; MORGAN, 2007; HARRISON, 2010).

The relationship between project and constitutional regions is a good illustration of the stakes in academic debates about scale and scalar systems. On one hand, project regions are situated in the organizational and hierarchical settings of the state

and thus concern the central government, sub-national entities such as provinces or districts, and municipalities. At the supra-national level, European institutions such as the EU and the Council of Europe (CoE) have been major players in the emergence and proliferation of project regions, facilitating their spread through the standardization of legal frameworks, including the 1980 CoE Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities and the EU's 2006 Regulation on European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) (DÜHR *et al.*, 2010). The proliferation of project regions has been driven particularly by financing through the EU INTERREG programme, and the promotion of transboundary models of cooperation, such as transboundary river basin management under the EU's Water Framework Directive or macro-regional strategies in the Baltic Sea and Danube regions (LARSEN, 2008; DUBOIS *et al.*, 2009).

On the other hand, the construction of project regions forms part of the spatial strategies of actors that have largely emancipated themselves from state-based frameworks, including NGOs, social movements and, to some extent, IGOs. Jointly or each in their own ways, they conceive project regions in order to understand, diagnose and propagate the type of reality for which they mobilize (e.g. ethnic, cultural or natural entities), and to organize their actions.

The construction of project regions has various implications in terms of scalar systems and scale (e.g. geographic, jurisdictional, or operational). Here, a scalar system refers to the assemblage of levels, and the relationships between them, within a particular type of scale: "an attribute of how one observes something rather than of the thing observed" and hence "not about the size of things but the spatial and temporal relations among them" (SAYRE, 2005: 280-81). Project regions involve actors that belong to public (political or administrative) and hierarchical scalar systems as well as other kinds of stakeholders which may have their own scalar organization (see BULKELEY, 2005); for example, many IGOs and NGOs have their own regional centres and structures of organization. Although the spatial focus of a project region takes into account these territorial levels, it is mainly conceived in relation to problems, issues and solutions. Therefore, its institutional position derives not from a single hierarchical scalar system, but from several such systems, of public institutions; of other stakeholders; and of scientific knowledge, when the latter is mobilized in the conception of the project.

The evolution of project regions, as well as the renewal of their study in terms of regions and scales, has been influenced by many factors. Among these, growing concerns with environmental problems have contributed to the complexification of spatial governance because ecological processes such as movements of air, flows of water, and migrations of species ignore conventional scalar systems. Numerous specialized stakeholders have thus joined traditional institutional players as experts,

opponents, or partners, prompting some scholars to argue that the 1990s marked the transition to "post-sovereign environmental governance" (KARKKAINEN, 2004).

In this context, specialized stakeholders include IGOs such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); global NGOs, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN); and others with a more limited geographical focus. Environmental project regions have also been promoted by the EU, through both multi-thematic cross-border initiatives and more specific instruments such as the Water Framework, Birds, and Habitats Directives.

Lacking the *raison d'être* of constitutional regions, actors involved in the construction of project regions have to resort to alternative sources of legitimacy. In this respect, recent experience has shown the crucial role of scientific knowledge and expertise. For example, geographers and statisticians are often called upon to identify the most suitable delimitation of an urban area before multi-jurisdictional institutions are organized to regulate urban planning and cooperation. While a constructivist point of view does not privilege scientific (or any other kind of) expertise, understanding the institutionalization of project regions requires consideration of the types of actors that invoke scientific expertise, what kind of scientific knowledge is invoked or discredited, and how such knowledge is translated in political projects. Through the lens of science and other sources of justification, a constructivist analysis of project region building thus generates key insights into the mobilization of cognitive, material and relational resources, as well as the power relations between the mobilizers.

Specialized actors involved in building project regions have often adopted their own sets of regional bio-physical entities, frequently justified on the basis of scientific arguments and considered adequate for shaping new political projects. For example, WWF has promoted the concept of 'ecoregion,' a concept that invokes natural science paradigms and criteria, but ultimately serves to identify political entities that can help optimize the organization's own conservationist strategy (OLSON and DINERSTEIN, 2002). The EU has required its Member States to designate Special Protection Areas (Birds Directive), Special Areas of Conservation (Habitats Directive) and River Basin Districts (Water Framework Directive). In some cases, local populations have participated in the process with their own complementary or competing priorities and modes of self-definition (UNNERSTALL, 2008; VIDEIRA *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, environmental controversies arising from the diversification of actors, perspectives, and modes of action, as well as the negotiations taking place between them, at different levels, have led to the construction of various types of environmental project regions and regional arrangements (BALSIGER and VANDEVEER, 2010; BALSIGER and DEBARBIEUX, 2011).

The institutionalization of European mountain regions provides the possibility to bring into focus the theoretical developments outlined above and to generate new insights, presented and discussed below, into contemporary trends in territorial and environmental governance. First, the European experience underlines that, while the specificity of mountain areas has been of interest to scientists for centuries (e.g. OLSEN, 1834; NICOLSON, 1959), it was rarely taken into account by public policies before the twentieth century. Initially, public policies adopted by states, and later by the EU, defined measures, mainly subsidies for farmers, that applied to all locations within mountain areas newly defined for particular policy aims (DEBARBIEUX and RUDAZ, 2010). The designation of domestic mountain areas thus served as a first step in the construction of project regions in which scientific knowledge became inscribed as but one of several lines of justification.

Second, a cumulative trend in mountain policies progressively combined the identification of mountain areas with the construction of regional institutions, which has both necessitated and reinforced an actor-oriented constructivist perspective. A particular impetus came from the rising global concern for mountain issues formalized at the 1992 United Nations Conference for Environment and Development (UNCED). This induced the involvement of numerous new stakeholders, including new states and, more significantly, international organizations (DEBARBIEUX and PRICE, 2008). They jointly promoted the identification of mountain areas at the global level, the adoption of new sets of national policies, and the development of transnational initiatives. Each of these initiatives involved a region-specific set of diverse stakeholders – though few, if any, from the private sector - organized in ad hoc processes and variably capable of promoting and justifying their own priorities and scalar systems. The growing influence of IGOs and NGOs represents a critical juncture because their relative ease to transcend state-based scalar hierarchies opened a window of opportunity to construct a new (or hybrid) scalar system for institutionalizing mountain and environmental governance.

Third, the global mountain agenda and early regional initiatives in the Alps and the Pyrenees stimulated a second generation of regional mountain initiatives in Central and South-Eastern Europe, as discussed in more detail below. This extension brought to the fore a tension between mountain regions constructed by actors *of* a region and mountain regions constructed by outside actors with extensive influence *in* a region.

### **Mountain policies in Europe: from sectoral to territorial approaches**

The origins of project regions focused on mountain areas can be traced to European states. Initially, these origins amounted to little more than demands for agricultural

subsidies from national lobbies. The targeted territories were newly defined with scientific criteria (mostly elevation and slope), but often administered through existing structures tied to constitutional regions. From the 1960s, project regions were consolidated through the establishment of institutions at the level of individual massifs; sectoral approaches gave way to integrated visions of mountain development. The EU conspicuously lagged behind national efforts, limiting its attention to preferential treatment of mountain farmers under the Less Favoured Areas (LFA) regulation. The emergence of project regions defined at the level of mountain ranges raised the specter of interscalar tension, as mountain ranges often divided constitutional regions, and conflicts over resources emerged between institutions constructed at the massif scale and the administrations of constitutional regions.

### ***National policies***

The first examples of the definition and delineation of mountain areas in public policies can be found in national initiatives from the 1920s to the 1960s<sup>1</sup>. States such as Austria, France, Italy, and Switzerland passed laws, often instigated by farming lobbies and emerging NGOs, that underlined specific constraints on mountain agriculture and the consequent need to provide financial support for mountain farmers. Such arguments and the related policies led to the first official definitions and delineations of mountain areas, implemented by each State in a specific way. Such processes were part of the growing trend of territorialization of public policies undertaken by many European states during the 20th century (FAURE et al 1997).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, several European states started to move beyond the original sectoral orientation, paving the way for the establishment of mountain-based project regions. Countries such as Italy, Switzerland, and France passed laws to promote socio-economic development and nature conservation in mountain areas. This required new definitions and delineations, yet each country used its own set of methodologies. This second wave of policies led to the adoption and institutionalization of intermediate levels of organization. For example, the Italian and Swiss laws defined both a mountain area at the national level, and inter-municipal institutions (*comunita montane* in Italy and *régions de montagne/Bergregionen* in Switzerland) as the level for conceiving and implementing development projects, and locating project ownership. In Switzerland, the institutionalization of *régions de montagne/Bergregionen* was often a drawn-out process because its conceptual underpinning on prevailing growth theories pitted rural villages against more powerful and central towns within the required inter-municipal institutions (BALSIGER, 2009). The French law established mountain *massifs* (e.g., Pyrenees, Jura, Vosges): a level at which an agent of the national administration (*Commissaire de massif*) was assigned and an assembly of socio-economic actors

(*Comité de massif*) nominated. Regional planning to sustain rural development and improve accessibility was also organized at this level, e.g., through the Massif Central Plan for the trans-regional area including all or parts of six French *Régions* and specific *Départements* and municipalities within them.

France, Italy and Switzerland, though using different models, are the States which have given most attention to institutionalizing mountain regions in policy development and implementation, building the related institutions according to the hierarchical scalar system of each country. Moreover, in two of these countries, elected officials from mountain areas created associations to sustain these agricultural and regional development policies: the Association Nationale des Elus de montagne in 1985 (France) and the Unione Nazionale Comuni Comunità Enti Montani in 1952 (Italy). A broader lobby for mountain regions was founded in 1943 in Switzerland: the Swiss Working Group for Mountain Areas (SAB), which brings together several cantons, *régions de montagne/Berggebiete*, and professional associations (BALSIGER, 2009).

### ***European policies***

In contrast to the flurry of national law-making and institution building, only one piece of legislation specifically referring to mountain areas has emerged from the EU: the LFA regulation (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 1975), which aims to provide subsidies for farmers who, because of so-called “natural handicaps,” can not fairly compete with modern lowland agriculture. Under Article 18 of this regulation, each Member State can define parts of its territory—each using specific criteria with regard to altitude and, sometimes, slope—as mountainous (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2004). Although the LFA regulation suggested a common vision of the EU and its Member States (mountains as a natural handicap for agricultural production), it did not generate common criteria for the delineation of corresponding entities. Rather, the definition of mountain areas as project regions remained “nationalized,” partly under the influence of national unions of farmers (GERBAUX, 2004).

Therefore, this first set of national laws and EU regulations, incorporating the so-called specificity of mountains in sectoral (e.g. agricultural) and later integrated (i.e. regional development) policies, led to the identification of linked localities and, sometimes, the institutionalization of regions in ways that mainly respected prevailing hierarchical scalar systems. Each took into account the political boundaries of national territories, municipalities, and sometimes subnational entities. In some cases, an intermediate institutional level was created. Although newly institutionalized regions sometimes included parts of two or more adjacent sub-national entities, for instance in France and Switzerland, the implementation of mountain policies mostly followed the scalar logic of nested hierarchies. Accordingly, the principal actors during this first stage

of mountain-based project region building were national and subnational administrations, and the level of interscalar tension was low and/or manifested in larger, national debates about decentralization and federalism.

### **The internationalization of the mountain agenda**

European national experiences with the rescaling of single and multisectoral policies for mountain areas paved the way for the appearance in the 1990s of mountain issues on the global agenda. Although the internationalization of the mountain agenda owed much to state actors, scientists and a number of IGOs and NGOs gradually became powerful promoters. In parallel, subnational constitutional regions seeking to counterbalance the prevailing focus on the state formed new cross-border organizations at the level of entire massifs or parts thereof. At both the global and the European level, science-based argumentation in favour of mountain-based project regions became the dominant approach.

### ***The emergence of a global mountain agenda***

In 1992, mountains explicitly entered the global policy arena at UNCED, with the inclusion of a specific chapter in 'Agenda 21,' the resulting plan of action. This Chapter 13 was the first outcome of an intense, worldwide mobilization of stakeholders, among which certain states, mostly European, played key roles. A key motivation for Switzerland and Italy was to take advantage of their respective experience in mountain policies (also gained through overseas development assistance) and export this globally. The prominence given to mountains at the global level was renewed in 1998, when the UN General Assembly passed a resolution designating 2002 as the International Year of Mountains (IYM) (PRICE and HOFER, 2005). The IYM aimed at spreading the idea that national policies should identify and specifically consider mountain areas, people and environmental specificities. In total, 78 countries created national committees or similar mechanisms. Although many of these countries had no official recognition of mountain areas or mountain policies, some discussed and sometimes adopted national mountain legislation or policies during or just after the IYM, including Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania in Europe (CASTELEIN et al., 2006). The rising global concern for mountains clearly focused on states for promoting initiatives at their own level, on the model provided by European countries.

Beyond the conventional intergovernmental dimension, numerous stakeholders saw the growing concern for sustainable mountain development as an opportunity to develop transboundary initiatives. Among the most active stakeholders of this 'mountain

agenda' were scientists, a few UN agencies, some NGOs, and the UNCED Secretariat itself. Each of these had more specifically framed problems and arguments according to its own vision and objectives. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) developed initiatives combining rural development, poverty alleviation, and nature conservation in the mountains of the South; UNEP was interested in creating a global vision of environmental issues and management; and many scientists sought to promote their own expertise and to organize scientific research and networks on mountain issues at a global level. For these stakeholders, the national level of policy-making and the identification of mountain areas at the level of nation states was not the main priority; indeed, the environmental focus of many of these actors frequently met with opposition at the national, and particularly the subnational level. They wanted to promote visions of mountains based on scientific knowledge and expertise, and initiatives focusing on the most relevant entities (DEBARBIEUX and PRICE, 2008).

In intergovernmental and transnational contexts, each stakeholder organization or group provided its own geography of mountain entities. In 2000, the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, produced a global map of mountains which defined 24 percent of the Earth's land surface as mountainous, using basic criteria such as altitude, slope, and relief (KAPOS *et al.*, 2000). This map provided a simple image of the category of mountain areas, and became a common reference for those who wished to frame subsequent work. Meanwhile, major NGOs had their own way of selecting certain mountain areas for framing and prioritizing their action, such as WWF, which defined the Alps, Carpathians, and Caucasus as key ecoregions. Their precise identification and characterization of mountain ranges and areas also relied on scientific expertise, most of these organizations having developed either such internal competencies, or collaborative ways of working with the increasingly structured scientific organizations (MAUZ *et al.*, 2012).

The scientific construction of mountain regions facilitated the creation of global and regional institutions, most of which involved different types of stakeholders. In 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the Mountain Partnership was created as a "voluntary alliance of interested parties (...) with the common goal of achieving sustainable development around the world" (PRICE and HOFER, 2005: 19). It now has a highly heterogeneous membership comprising 50 countries (including 16 in Europe), 16 IGOs, and 142 major groups (mainly NGOs and scientific institutions, and a very few private sector organisations), with considerable contrasts in their conceptions of mountain issues. Notably, although they joined forces in their support for action at the level of mountain ranges, even in their advocacy for sustainable development, they differed in their prioritization of sustainability dimensions.

The Mountain Partnership has also promoted and supported regional institutions, at the level of major ranges or sections of ranges, e.g., in the Andes and the Himalayas, for developing expertise in applied research in sustainable development and nature conservation (DEBARBIEUX and PRICE, 2008).

Although individual states sought to transmit their mountain experiences and expertise beyond their borders, the globalization of mountain issues was not meant to transfer national authority to the global level. Indeed, global initiatives have explicitly addressed national issues, thus to some extent diffusing the risk of interscalar tension, and heavily relied on the capacity (and political will) of states to be part of the process. At the same time, these initiatives have also focused on project regions, where a set of stakeholders (scientists, states, IGOs, NGOs, etc.) sought to translate knowledge about mountain areas into political action, and to cooperate within the general frame of the global mountain agenda. The rise of a global concern for mountains during the last two decades has thus aimed at combining global, national and transnational initiatives, and at articulating the scales according to which scientific knowledge, national institutions and policies, as well as international organizations, are structured.

### ***European mountain initiatives and organizations***

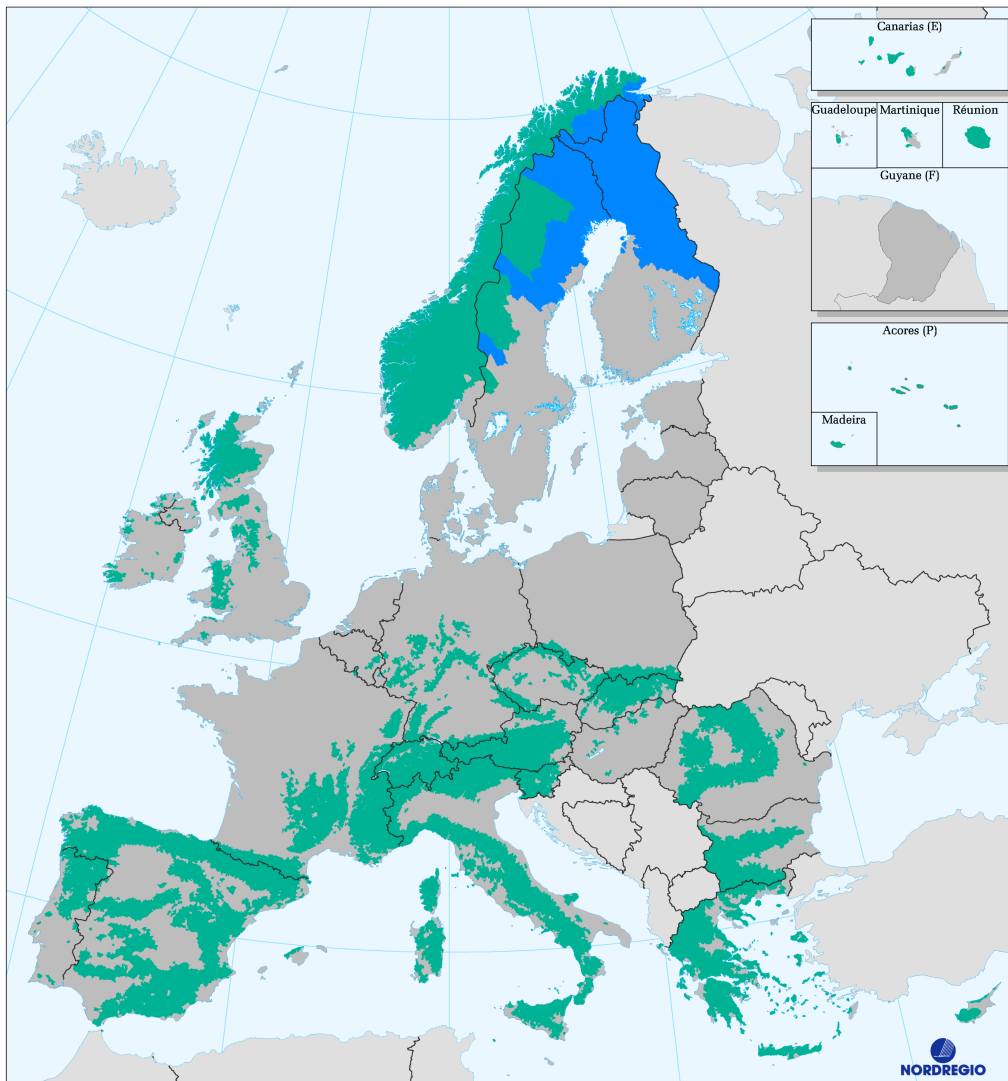
European initiatives for mountain areas during the last two decades can be understood as deriving from three sources: the national experiences of some states (see above); the intent to develop EU policies framed on specific environmental issues; and the global trend, fueled by international conferences, IGOs and global NGOs, to focus on mountain areas and to promote related institutions.

In the 1990s, the only relevant legal instrument of the EU remained the LFA regulation. However, a number of international organizations, called “working communities”, were established in the preceding decades. These came from constitutional regions (Spanish *Comunidades autonomas*, French *Régions*, Swiss *Cantons*, Austrian *Länder*, etc.) in the Alps—Arge Alp (founded in 1972 by regions of Central Alps), Alpen-Adria (in the eastern part of the Alps, 1978), and Cotrao (1982, in the western part)—the Pyrenees (1983), and the Jura (1985). Although these working communities were mainly consultative platforms, with no political competencies, they contributed to the rise of the idea that transboundary mountain areas could be relevant entities for institutional initiatives. The first international treaty focusing on a transnational massif, the Alpine Convention, was signed in 1991, following a process described below.

In the early 2000s, the EU debated the content of the so-called European Constitution, later revised and adopted as the Lisbon Treaty (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2009), and reformulated its regional policy according to the concept of

“territorial cohesion” (FALUDI, 2005). In this process, the idea of giving greater recognition to mountain areas was promoted by a diverse and overlapping group of actors: national and European associations of elected officials of mountain regions; Euromontana, an association promoting rural development in mountain areas; the European Social and Economic Committee, which published two reports on mountain regions (EUROPEAN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC COMMITTEE, 1988, 2002); the Committee of the Regions, the assembly of delegates from constitutional regions which advises the European institutions, which made its own recommendations on three different occasions (e.g. COMMITTEE OF REGIONS, 2008); and certain European Commissioners from mountain areas (e.g., EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2003). The aim of these various actors was to widen the dominant scalar vision of the EU regional policy, which mainly focused on regions (at ‘NUTS<sup>ii</sup> 3’ level as defined by the EU: e.g. French *Départements*, German *Kreise*, or Italian *Province*) with a lower GDP than the European average, by adding complementary criteria including environmental and accessibility factors.

To inform EU policy formulation, the European Commission (2004) and later the European Environment Agency (2010) commissioned scientific studies. Using adapted versions of the global delineation of mountains prepared by UNEP-WCMC, these studies provided socio-economic and environmental assessments for Europe’s mountains as a whole and at the level of various regional entities (PRICE *et al.*, 2004; EEA, 2010). For the first time, stakeholders concerned with European mountain areas could take advantage of an encompassing vision of the category (Map 1), even though, for some countries, the delineation of mountains did not conform to legal delineations or certain stakeholders’ perceptions. While the Lisbon Treaty recognized mountain areas in the new territorial cohesion policy, the new regional policy in 2007 did not specifically do so; a decision motivated by the lack of arguments to prove that the Europe’s various mountain regions deserved common treatment within EU legislation and policy instruments. Therefore, in contrast to river basins in the Water Framework Directive, mountain areas as a locus for organizing public policies have still not found a place in the institutional architecture of European policies.



Delimitation of mountain municipalities in Europe

- Municipalities defined as mountainous according to topographic criteria
- Municipalities defined as mountainous according to climatic criteria
- Study area
- Other countries

Source: Eurostat/GISCO

0 500Km

Administrative boundaries: EuroGeographics, ISTAT Romania, NCRD, Oikos, Swiss Federal Statistical Office, Eurostat/GISCO

Map 1. Delineation of mountain municipalities in Europe, from EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2004). Note that this includes both mountain municipalities defined according to topographic criteria, as discussed, and also climatic criteria (see PRICE et al., 2004), and does not include the mountains of all European states.

## **The transnationalization of mountain initiatives**

The current phase in the institutionalization of European massifs is the combined outcome of national experiences, a supportive global mountain agenda and repertoire of scientific discourse, and the diversification of mountain promoters. As discussed below, the latter, in particular, has also contributed to a diversification of governance models, variously tied to traditional inter-state cooperation (Alpine Convention); involving inter-state cooperation but largely driven by external IGOs (Carpathian Conventions, Balkans and Dinaric Arc Convention processes); or evolving around constitutional regions, either organized in working groups at the level of a massif or submassif, or in cross-border collaboration encouraged and financed by the EU. Whereas scientifically legitimized environmental objectives and mountain delineations characterize the first and second models, the third is distinguished by the politically, rather than scientifically, motivated desire of constitutional regions to play a role in European multilevel governance. Each of these transboundary initiatives has problems of legitimacy, some related to the ambiguous role of the EU, others to the lack of participation by constitutional regions or the ambivalent motivations of states. Each problem in its own way underlines the permanently constructed and contested nature of project regions, as well as the interscalar tensions underpinning different logics of territorialization.

### ***The rise of European mountain 'massifs': the Alpine Convention***

The project of creating a regional political institution at the level of the Alps began in 1952 when representatives of Austria, France, Italy and Switzerland, as well as of German nature protection and mountaineering organizations and the IUCN, created the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps (CIPRA) to promote the protection of the range under a single institution. CIPRA was thus one of the first organizations to introduce an ecoregional approach at the level of a mountain range and a principle of division of natural space into politics. However, its objective took some decades to realize. In the late 1980s, accelerating awareness of environmental degradation, a number of high-profile natural disasters in the Alps, and CIPRA's successful mobilization of key actors led to the rejuvenation of the convention project. With a mandate from the European Parliament, CIPRA, IUCN, and the three transalpine working communities prepared a first draft in 1989. National governments joined the process following the call by German Environment Minister Klaus Töpfer, and two years later, in November 1991, the Alpine States and the EU signed the resulting Alpine Convention. While the European Commission had not developed a European mountain

policy, its support to the Alpine Convention marked the beginning of involvement in transboundary initiatives in numerous mountain regions.

The first article of the Alpine Convention (1991) states: “The Convention shall cover the Alpine region, as described and depicted in the Annex”: a map depicting an area somewhat larger than most scientific definitions of the region (WESSELY and GUTHLER, 2004). This regional entity has thus been promoted according to arguments focusing on natural features and the need for sustainable development strategies in such a context: the Parties are “CONVINCED of the need for economic interests to be reconciled with ecological requirements” (Alpine Convention, 1991).

The Convention has led to the creation of various complementary transnational initiatives grounded in national or subnational entities. Reflecting the scientific discourse underlying the Alpine project region, the International Scientific Committee for Alpine regions was created as a network of scientists representing national or subnational academic institutions. Strong reliance on scientific knowledge was also to guide the establishment of a System for the Observation of the Alps, and targeted scientific research was to support Alpine policy making. Additional transnational initiatives include the Alpine Network of Protected Areas (ALPARC) which includes parks and natural reserves designated according to national or subnational regulations and legislation; the Club Arc Alpin, founded by national Alpine Clubs seeking to coordinate their actions across the range; and other networks (*Pearls of the Alps* for ski resorts, *Alliance in the Alps* for municipalities, *Network Enterprise Alps* for companies, etc.). Mostly initiated by CIPRA, each of the latter networks is committed to promoting sustainable development in its own practices. Many have been funded through EU regional policy as INTERREG projects. CIPRA also created national representations, for both juridical and political (being able to build individual relations with each Member State) reasons, in each Alpine State. Therefore, even though they focus on the Alps as a whole, most of these non-state organizations are nested in institutional hierarchical scales. The rise of such Alpine networks gave credibility to the idea that the Alps were becoming a political entity of a new kind, which in turn empowered actors operating at the spatial scale of the Alpine Convention and contributing to public debates about Alpine issues (DEL BIAGGIO, 2009).

Ultimately, the Alpine Convention is both a regional institution legitimized by environmental knowledge and objectives in terms of collaborative management, and organized as a set of diverse stakeholders embedded—for juridical, strategic or tactical reasons—in the classical, hierarchical scalar system of European countries and Union, yet in agreement with the fundamentally transboundary, ecoregional conception of the Alpine scale. Nevertheless, substantive commitments vary across signatories to the Convention, with relatively clear splits between countries favoring, respectively, nature conservation or socio-economic development priorities; and the inherent scalar logics of

priority domains do not necessarily correspond (BALSIGER, 2012), e.g., for trans-Alpine transport and upstream-downstream energy issues. In addition, subnational constitutional regions are conspicuously absent from the governance of the Convention.

### ***The spread of initiatives at the massif level***

During the last two decades, the Alpine Convention has become the most prominent transboundary mountain initiative. As a legally binding international treaty, its formal status remains unparalleled. Yet its state-centered model of governance has also been the subject of extensive criticism, especially because of its failure to officially recognize the role of subnational constitutional regions. Rather than seeking legitimacy in a political constituency, this model of governance has relied heavily on scientific justification. By contrast, constitutional regions have pursued a model of cooperation that is less formalized, in part because many national constitutions prohibit subnational entities from negotiating international agreements. Instead, transboundary initiatives that evolved around working communities since the 1970s have been grounded in multilevel governance and thus more integrated in European integration politics and policy. Both models of governance for such project regions have entailed the rescaling of mountain regions, but with different modalities and interscalar consequences.

Against the background of the emerging global mountain agenda and the signing of the Alpine Convention, earlier experiences in the Pyrenees, Jura, and Alps received new attention in discussions related to the European Constitutional Treaty and the Territorial Cohesion policy in the early 2000s. The failure to introduce mountain areas as a whole into EU regional policy stimulated existing and new initiatives for organizing mountain governance at the level of *massifs*. In 2002, the almost thirty-year old *Communauté de Travail du Jura* was transformed into the *Conférence TransJurasienne*: a transnational initiative joining the French national government and several French regions, regional councils, and municipal associations, as well as Swiss cantons (the Swiss Federal Government assuming an observer status). Following the creation in 2006 of the EGTC and building to some extent on the Alpine working communities, some constitutional regions supported the creation of project regions such as the Euroregion *Alpi-Mediterraneo* (2007, currently being transformed into an EGTC) and the EGTC *Pyénées-Méditerranée* (2009), both of which include mountain areas. Though not only mountain issues were mentioned in the work agendas of these institutions, their delineation put mountains at the very core of their territory, encouraging them to address issues such as transportation, rural development and public services in areas with low population densities. The EGTC regulation broke with previous legal practice and invited states to join formal agreements between subnational entities. The resulting model of transboundary governance is thus a hybrid that involves both states and

constitutional regions in the building of project regions; it also reinforces the interscalar complexity among ecoregional entities, constitutional regions, and nation states.

Despite the increased hybridization of transboundary governance in mountain regions, the Alpine Convention's intergovernmental model has remained highly influential (e.g. CIPRA, 2002). However, while it served as an example in the successful negotiation of an international convention for the Carpathians, the limits of its diffusion potential are becoming evident in South-East Europe. In both cases, science-driven NGOs and IGOs have played a strong role, highlighting their continued involvement in regional governance and their growing interest and capacity to initiate regional assessments and institutional arrangements at the level of mountain ranges. Yet, as with the Alpine Convention, the involvement of constitutional regions has been weak.

The Carpathian Convention was signed by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, the Slovak Republic, and Ukraine in 2003 and entered into force in 2006. Its overall framework is very similar to that of the Alpine Convention – an intergovernmental treaty in which states are represented by their Ministry of Environment – partly because of intense cooperation between representatives of the Alpine Convention and the promoters of the Carpathian Convention during the IYM. However, the genesis was rather different. With no regional NGO like CIPRA for the Carpathians, the project was initiated by the regional office of a global NGO, WWF, which prepared the first regional report on the state of environment and a set of thematic maps (WWF, 2001). The Convention document was drafted by an IGO, UNEP, with the technical support of the European Academy of Bolzano/Bozen, an Italian publicly-funded scientific institution.

The objectives of the Carpathian Convention, like those of its Alpine counterpart, focus on sustainable development and nature conservation. It provides a “framework of cooperation” outlining general objectives and principles. The protocols are more ambitious than their Alpine counterparts, especially with regard to biodiversity conservation and a common strategy, through the preparation of a Strategic Action Plan. In this context, a Carpathian Network of Protected Areas and a network of scientists (the Forum Carpaticum), more or less inspired by their Alpine counterparts, have been created.

Since the Carpathian Convention was adopted, the roles of some institutional partners have remained ambiguous. The European Commission, which co-funded the convention process through its INTERREG programme, has not yet joined as a signatory, in contrast to the Alps. UNEP made an environmental assessment of the range (UNEP/GRID, 2007), and its office in Vienna has assumed the role of the Convention's Interim Secretariat because the Parties have not yet agreed on how and where to establish a permanent governance structure.

Moreover, despite delimitation of the geographical scope of the Convention at an early stage and the production of maps for the environmental assessment (RUFFINI et al., 2006), the Parties have been unable to agree on the exact perimeter of the Carpathians, mainly because of geopolitical disagreement between Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary on issues relating to cultural minorities (FALL and EGERER, 2004). Nevertheless, the Convention strongly encourages its Parties to disseminate its objectives among local and regional institutions and even forces them, much more than the Alpine Convention for its own Parties, to become involved in long-term nature conservation, restoration and sustainable use of natural habitats, and to establish an ecological network throughout the range (BROGGIATO and CHURCH, 2008).

Thus, while the Carpathian Convention reflects the institutionalization of an ambitious project region with an operational argumentation, it is equally a project where the complete set of stakeholders remains unclear, partly because the delimitation remains fuzzy. At the same time, the very absence of delimitation has helped diffuse tension between scalar logics, such as between ecoregional and ethno-cultural constructions.

### ***The limits of the massif model: South-Eastern Europe***

Initiatives for creating mountain project regions in South-Eastern Europe (SEE) and the Balkan Peninsula are still more recent than in the Alps and the Carpathians. Most SEE initiatives share the sustainable development priorities of their counterparts, albeit with specific attention to the legacy of recent conflicts and the need to provide economic development opportunities for local populations who are among the poorest in Europe. While almost all SEE initiatives are driven by external partners, especially the same science-driven environmental IGOs and NGOs already involved in the Carpathians, the involvement of subnational constitutional regions is very weak.

Some SEE initiatives have been deliberately limited in extent or content, including transboundary projects aiming to facilitate networking between partners responsible for the management of natural resources and to support nature protection initiatives, for example, for West Stara Planina, which became a Euroregion in 2006; the 'Mountain Protected Area Network in the Balkans and the Dinaric Arc' promoted by the Environment and Security Initiative; and the empowerment of national associations for mountain regions in Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania with financial and technical assistance from SAB and Euromontana.

Other initiatives have sought to promote an overall regional vision and strategy for SEE mountain areas. As early as 2004, Macedonia, national associations for mountain areas, and European and global partners (Euromontana, FAO's Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development-Mountains [SARD-M] programme, and IUCN)

launched a cooperative initiative to create a 'South East European (Balkans) Framework Convention'. Driven by UNEP, which largely reproduced its Carpathian approach, meetings between 2005 and 2007 produced a draft framework convention. This justified the project in terms clearly borrowed from the current global motto, underlining the unity of the supposed 'region,' which "subordinate[s] its spatial framing to an ecosystemic vision." Furthermore, the area was to be delineated according to natural scientific knowledge and encompass *a priori* existing ecological entities. While the list of involved countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo under UN interim administration, and Greece; Slovenia was to join later) suggested that the entire peninsula be part of the process, the definition of the scalar character of this purported natural entity remained unclear.

More than seven years into the process, the convention project is still waiting for its precise formulation and full state involvement. In 2011, the subset of SEE countries sharing the Dinaric Arc adopted a resolution for the sustainable development of that range. While the cast of global partners—now enlarged by WWF (which identified the Dinaric Arc as one of its global ecoregions) and UNESCO—hopes this may lead to a Convention, uneven national commitments and competition with other regional orders, such as the emerging Adriatic-Ionian macro region, have rendered this outcome uncertain (DJORDJEVIC and BALSIGER, 2012). Region building for the mountains of SEE has not only faced obstacles on the scientific front; the lack of political resources in the area has constrained parallel efforts by several actors working to produce a general image and knowledge base for these mountains. In 2009, for instance, DEWA/GRID-Europe<sup>iii</sup> and UNEP's Regional Office for Europe launched the Dinaric Arc and Balkans Environment Outlook (DABEO). This initiative followed a similar model used for the Carpathians and the Caucasus (UNEP/GRID, 2002, 2007), relying on the involvement of national administrations and a network of experts named by them. As a result of bottlenecks in funding and weak motivation of some national partners, DABEO has been abandoned. FAO's SARD-M programme, which has successfully prepared national and regional reports in other parts of the world including the Carpathians (RUFFINI *et al.*, 2008), foundered for similar reasons. Insisting that "the regional approach is a necessary precondition for sustainable development" (FAO-SARD-M, 2008, 16), SARD-M's activities fell short because of difficulties in finding local expertise in the integrated development of mountain regions and the weak involvement of SEE states.

Both the Carpathian and Balkans Convention processes were mostly initiated by external actors (FAO, UNEP, UNESCO, Switzerland, Italy, etc.) and driven by a global discourse that shaped the projects through a top-down approach without involving subnational constitutional regions. The main difference between these two initiatives lies in the political will of the respective states, which in turn relates to the scalar logic of

European integration. Whereas most Carpathian states used the Convention to demonstrate their capacity to join the EU in 2004 (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary) and 2007 (Romania), this common motivation has been lacking in the Balkans. Though all SEE countries are interested in entering the EU, their accession calendars and geopolitical commitments have varied. Bulgaria, Montenegro and Macedonia were interested in being part of initiatives referring to the Balkans as a regional level of EU structuration; Croatia and Slovenia have seemingly preferred engagement in Central European than in SEE/Balkan regional initiatives, with Slovenia temporarily taking the lead in the Dinaric Convention process in anticipation of becoming a bridge to the Alpine region; Serbia has been unwilling to join any initiative alongside Kosovo; and Greece has shown hesitation to join initiatives that focus on a Balkan scale, while remaining sensitive to legitimizing Macedonia through international agreements<sup>iv</sup>. The transboundary rescaling of mountain regions in SEE is further undermined by uneven domestic policy commitments to mountain areas as such. Whereas Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia have initiated such policies, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina seem reluctant to do so for lack of funds, insufficient expertise and for geopolitical reasons inherited from the wars of the 1990s.

Thus, the attempts to institutionalize transnational mountain regions in the Alps, Carpathians and SEE are evidence of environmental concerns in the development of project regions, but the uneven outcomes also point to a number of limits. Particularly in SEE, the diversity of geopolitical visions and strategies of the States undermined the Balkans Convention, demonstrating the limits of the transboundary *massif* model.

## **Conclusion**

Mountain areas have progressively become a common category of public action in Europe since the second half of the twentieth century. It has now become common to refer to the definition and delimitation of mountain areas, and many institutionalized project regions have been constructed at the subnational and transboundary level.

This scalar innovation is the result of three major trends. First, several European states adopted specific policies for geographical areas, which received a growing attention within national debates. This approach to mountain areas as project regions was adopted by a number of Alpine states from the 1920s to the 1980s and was later encouraged in Central and South-East European countries seeking EU membership. Second, a mountain agenda at the global level has been adopted, aiming at advocating mountain specificities in the growing concern for environment and sustainable development. Third, project regions have been constructed to encourage policy coordination and sustainable development in transboundary massifs. The Alpine

Convention was the first institution to encompass such an entity, but various other attempts have reached different stages of institutionalization since the global Mountain Partnership and selected international organizations began to promote this frame of action in the 2000s.

All of these initiatives are related to each other through the idea that natural features— whether seen as handicaps or assets—should be taken into account in the territorialization of public policies. In turn, this has required scientific expertise, explicit delimitation and specific measures. Each initiative has produced a regional body of knowledge about its mountain area and shown an interest in turning this into a regional entity—a massif—with corresponding institutions. These initiatives typically combine various existing institutions, including constitutional regions nested in state scalar systems as well as specialized IGOs and NGOs; during the last two decades, these have developed extensive competencies in the introduction of scientific expertise into political action and promoted environmental and sustainable development strategies through mountain initiatives.

The number and variety of stakeholders has greatly increased over time. Though IGOs and NGOs have taken the lead in most recent projects, they have had to align their rescaling efforts with the political will (Alps, Carpathians) or resistance (Balkans) of states. Because stakeholder priorities have differed and state commitments have been uneven, regional arrangements reveal significant variation in their institutional forms of cooperation, thematic priorities, and degree of precision in the delineation of the concerned areas. Correspondingly, the outcomes of these initiatives vary considerably.

In the final analysis, these initiatives are related to each other, yet do not derive from a single model. Hence, there is no specific type that could serve as a model for EU regional policy for mountain areas, even if the EU were willing to pursue such a policy (which it currently is not). The mountain initiatives that have taken shape in Europe are thus always unique arrangements determined by the composition of associated stakeholders and the priorities they (can) agree to put forward.

What does the institutionalization of mountain regions in Europe tell us about prevailing conceptual accounts of regionalization? Above all, it demonstrates the usefulness of distinguishing between constitutional and project regions, as variations in the ways in which the two are intertwined offer new perspectives on the role of non-state actors in regionalization. In particular, differences between transboundary mountain initiatives in different parts of Europe derive in significant ways from the degree of success or failure with which NGOs and IGOs could engage the scalar logic of nation states. Another important lesson to be gained from the history of institutionalization is that the conceptual debate between relational and territorial perspectives of regions and regionalization is somewhat moot, since both sets of arguments assist in understanding part of the story. Thus, regionalization in the

Carpathians and Balkans cannot be understood without taking into account external actors such as UNEP or the EU; conversely, making sense of subnational opposition to the Alpine Convention requires an understanding of the territorial realities of politics in constitutional regions. Equally, scientific expertise is part of this territorial/relational dimension of the making of project regions, since scientists have welcomed, and even initiated, the idea that environmental entities should be managed as institutional regions (i.e., through a territorial approach) and their own activities and approaches to constructing and working within networks—both within the scientific community and with their partners such as global IGOs and NGOs—are highly relational.

From this perspective, the actor-oriented constructivist approach adopted in this article has several advantages over more structural explanations. First, compared to the relatively static, though no less constructed, nature of constitutional regions, the fluid nature of project regions requires greater attention to the agents involved in ongoing and everyday practices of (re)creating the targets of their practices. The actor-oriented approach is specifically tailored to focus attention in such a way. Second, and related, close examination of the actors involved in constructing project regions around mountain ranges facilitates the identification of competing frames—and competing scalar logics—and hence the researcher's task of tracing the evolution of such frames across time and space. Finally, observation of the practices of the different actors can help reveal reflexive capacities on their part, and thus generate insights into the nature and dynamics of institutional and other changes, as well as the internal and external circumstances under which such changes become possible.

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<sup>i</sup> Although nineteenth-century forest laws in Switzerland, Austria, and France made reference to mountains, they did not formally delineate them (DEBARBIEUX and RUDAZ, 2010).

<sup>ii</sup> Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics: an EU standard for referencing the subdivisions of EU Member States for statistical purposes.

<sup>iii</sup> DEWA (Division of Early Warning and Assessment)/GRID (Global Resource Information Database)-Europe is part of UNEP's group of environmental information centers.

<sup>iv</sup> Due to a dispute with Greece over its name, the Republic of Macedonia was admitted to the United Nations in 1993 under the provisional reference of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).