
Europeanizing territoriality—towards soft spaces?

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Abstract. This paper explores the coexistence of relational and territorial spaces—soft spaces—through the experiences of EU integration and territorialization. First, we seek a better understanding of EU integration through an engagement with the literature and research on soft spaces. We propose that EU integration is best understood as involving an interplay between territorial and relational understandings and approaches that vary through time, a variation that can be categorized as involving pooled territoriality, supraterritoriality, and nonterritoriality. Second, we seek to add to the current research and literature on soft spaces by focusing upon the changing character of soft spaces and their temporalities. We approach these two dimensions through an exploration of two ex post case studies, the development of which typically shows different stages of softening, hardening, and of differing degrees of Europeanization. With the focus on Europeanization, the paper concludes with three findings: the new spaces of European territoriality are characterized by, first, *temporal dynamics*, second, their *parallel existence* with ‘hard’ spaces, and, finally, they can be employed as a *political tool*.

Keywords: soft spaces, territoriality, Europeanization, Habitats Directive, macroregions

1 Introduction

Recent debates on the nature of space and scale have explored their social, porous, and networked nature (eg, Amin, 2004; Massey, 2005; Thrift, 2004) and argued for a relational view, highlighting

“first, that space is constituted through an infinite set of multilayered interactions; second, that space is understood to contain the potential for multiplicity as an expression of social plurality; and third, that space is recognized as being constantly under construction” (Goodwin, 2012, page 2).

Such perspectives challenge ‘territorial’ and ‘bounded’ understandings of space and scale, disputing the idea that space can be understood as a ‘container’ and scales as nested hierarchies of bounded and partitioned spaces (Gualini, 2006).

This ‘relational turn’ has itself been challenged from a variety of perspectives that seek to highlight the binary and unhelpful nature in which relational and territorial spaces are portrayed. Such a reaction has sought to bring territory ‘back in’ by rejecting what Jones (2009) refers to as the ‘crude caricatures’ of relational thinkers that present nonrelational thinking as ‘static’. There are also an emerging number of studies that seek to explore the nature of spatial governance empirically, drawing upon evolving new forms of spatial governance across different policy sectors.

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In seeking to overcome the territory–relational dualism, Allen and Cochrane (2010) have explored the nature of spatial and scalar restructuring, coming to the conclusion that regional politics draw upon and employ a range of relational networks that stretch beyond regions but are also simultaneously lodged within them. As Cochrane has put it, “politics in practice still seems to retain a **strong territorial focus**, or at least territory seems still to provide a significant focus around which a range of political projects are organised” (2012, page 95). It remains the case, as Goodwin argues, that a lot of practical politics continues to be conducted in, through, and against a set of institutions whose jurisdiction is territorially defined (2012, page 3). The upshot of such theoretical and empirical challenges to the relational turn is a rebalancing and tempering of the view of space as a collection of networks and flows and scale as a political construction with no preordained hierarchy. According to Painter (2010), territory remains the quintessential state space. More recently there have been **attempts to overcome the territorial–relational** standoff through the notion of **assemblage** that broadly concerns how spaces and places are **put together whilst retaining their heterogeneity** (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011). Drawing upon Latour among others, **assemblage thinking** argues that **places are complex and unique configurations of global and local factors that blur the binary nature of structure and agency, near and far, social and material**. The emphasis in assemblage thinking is upon emergence, multiplicity, and determinacy leading to the need for **‘thick descriptions’** of how places, for example, manifest, assemble, and reassemble neoliberalism [though for an alternative view see Brenner et al (2011, page 225)].

Despite this revisionism and welcome engagement with the actual practices of territorial and spatial governance, such territorial–relational debates have largely been abstract and/or normative and have made few inroads into policy spaces and disciplines such as spatial development. Within the EU recent studies have highlighted how **spatial governance** has begun to address **the tensions within state-bounded territorial and relational networked governance** through the emergence of new spaces such as the Baltic Sea Region (Stead, 2011). These new spaces provide a ‘spatial fix’ that straddles the need to provide legally enabled and democratically accountable territorially linked plans and strategies in ways that also **reflect the complex relational world of multiple, networked spaces**. Within the EU there is also another driver of new spaces. Spatial planning across Europe is itself reflective of the tensions **between nation-state territoriality and EU territorial cohesion objectives**. A range of different territorial strategies of the EU have emerged, each influencing the nature of territorial/spatial governance. It is also clear that EU integration differs between sectors as well as through time, leading to a complex and evolving set of tensions and new spaces (Dühr, 2009; Faludi, 2003; 2010a). Spatial planning as an activity facilitates such spatial reconfiguration, simultaneously embracing relational understandings and approaches while **acting** within territorially defined and **legally** sanctioned spaces. This duality requires **planning to think and act in different realms of space**, engaging with the global, national, regional, and bespoke, functional spaces yet working through other, often more stable and accountable, spaces.

Such theoretical reflections and tensions on the **changing nature of EU** space and the role of spatial planning have lacked empirical analyses of how, for example, tensions are resolved in contemporary practices of spatial governance. Recent experiences of emerging or new spaces around spatial or development planning might provide a way forward. A number of studies across Europe have highlighted and explored the emergence of so-called **soft spaces** as attempts to create **hybrids of territorial and relational spaces** (see, for example, Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007; 2009; 2010; Counsell et al, 2012; Haughton et al, 2012; Heley, 2013; Luukkonen, 2014; Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; Olesen, 2011, pages 145–162; Stead, 2011; Waterhout, 2010). Soft spaces constitute new spaces for development planning that can

be relatively enduring or ephemeral, formal or informal, centrally sanctioned or locally driven. Soft spaces, sometimes accompanied by fuzzy boundaries, provide an opportunity to address mismatches between administrative and functional areas by creating bespoke spaces for dealing with specific issues such as regeneration, integrating different sectors such as transport, infrastructure, education, etc in such processes operating at variable scales.

Studies of soft spaces have focused upon spatial planning where future strategies and plans for an area have been territorially sanctioned and tethered though relationally connected to issues and influences far beyond. Yet development planning is not the only field or sector where such tensions and possible hybrid solutions arise. This paper explores the coexistence of relational and territorial spaces—soft spaces—through the experiences of EU integration and territorialization. First, we seek a better understanding of EU integration through an engagement with the literature and research on soft spaces. We propose that EU integration is best understood as involving an interplay between territorial and relational understandings and approaches that vary through time, a variation that can be categorized as involving pooled territoriality, supraterritoriality, and nonterritoriality. Second, we seek to add to the current research and literature on soft spaces by focusing upon the changing character of soft spaces and their temporalities. Some soft spaces might be very limited in time; others ‘harden’ towards strongly institutionalized forms; and others remain ‘soft’ over a long time. We approach these two objectives through an exploration of several EU policy case studies, the development of which typically shows different stages of softening, ‘hardening’, and of differing degrees of Europeanization. This reflection leads, finally, to a proposed research agenda that more thoroughly links territoriality, institutional change, and power plays.

2 Spatial planning, territory, and soft spaces

Recent debates on the nature of space and scale and the need to understand geography in relational terms have made some limited though important inroads into planning imaginations and practices (see, for example, Davoudi and Strange, 2009; Graham and Healey, 1999; Healey, 2006). However, such interpretations and arguments for more relational forms of spatial planning⁽¹⁾ or the ‘strategic turn’ have tended to overlook or gloss over disjunctures between the broad-brushed and largely abstract discussions of relational thinking and the nature and practices of territorially embedded spatial planning (see as well Luukkonen, 2014). Planning practice has always accepted the need to think beyond territorial units. Yet the entreaty to plan more relationally has tended to ‘wish away’ or overlook the enduring and significant hierarchical ontology of scalar politics and government. Financial powers, infrastructure coordination and investment, ecological and environmental concerns, to name a few issues, all remain situated within hierarchical structures of government and governance. Yet, we can also see that tiered, hierarchical structures of politics and power are also influenced by relational networks and are themselves porous and malleable.

Part of the solution lies, we feel, in rejecting the ‘either/or’ dichotomy of the relational/territorial approach. Relational and territorial perspectives are not only far less opposed than is often presented but from the standpoint of spatial planning also relate to different functions of spatial governance. Spatial planning exists at the intersection of relational understandings and the need for territorial governance. In other words, plan and strategy making needs to think and act relationally and territorially. This distinction is not always a clear one from relational analyses of planning. Another way to think about this need to act and think relationally and territorially is to consider the need for planning to both ‘open up’ strategy and plan making to acknowledge and take account of multiple influences, networks,

⁽¹⁾We use the term spatial planning in a general sense to capture the variously labelled systems and practices of land-use or development planning across Europe.

and flows and then necessarily ‘close down’ such diversity in the form of a territorially based strategy or plan based upon the allocation of legal rights and responsibilities. Thinking and acting relationally come up against the need for accountability and transparency, the political dimension, as well as a suite of legal sanctions to ensure that decisions and strategies are implemented and enforced. Thus relational perspectives are necessarily anchored to territorial functions in spatial planning.

Recent research on the practices of spatial planning across Europe has highlighted and explored how this dual function of thinking and acting relationally and territorially has been managed through the practice of soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries, particularly when the relational spaces of planning are multiple and fragmented. At one level soft spaces have emerged as attempts to represent and reflect space beyond and within territorial boundaries:

“So whilst planning still needs its clear legal ‘fix’ around set boundaries for formal plans, if it is to reflect the more complex relational world of associational relationships which stretch across a range of geographies, planning also needs to operate through other spaces, and it is these we think of as ‘soft spaces’” (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009, page 619).

However, it would be misleading to ascribe a single justification to the growing use of soft spaces, as evidence suggests that there are a variety of uses and backgrounds (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010). At one level soft spaces emerge to provide opportunities for functional planning to address mismatches between territorial boundaries and coherent areas such as housing markets, travel-to-work, or river catchment areas bringing in new actors and interests from beyond existing territorial concerns: in other words, drawing in relational conceptions of networked space into territorial forms of governance. At another level soft spaces can emerge to address specific and complex issues around growth management or urban regeneration within territories in relational ways. In this form soft spaces reflect the desire to create forms of networked governance to reflect the complexity of societal issues and institutions. A third driver of soft spaces concerns the question of competences: governing in a multilevel setting always involves struggles about mandates: which actors of what level have a say in which policy fields? Here, soft spaces emerge to challenge or obscure where power actually resides. This point is of particular importance in the context of European integration, as we will detail later. Fourth, there is an important experimental and political dimension to soft spaces that allows them to be used politically, testing strategies and approaches to an issue without ceding ultimate authority. If successful, then such spaces can ‘harden’ (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012) or disappear if their function has been achieved. If not successful then they can be disavowed and dropped (Haughton et al, 2012). Similarly, soft spaces are often accompanied by ‘fuzzy boundaries’ that attempt to insert new agendas, challenge existing identities and territorial representations but with a degree of uncertainty over the issues and actions to be addressed (Haughton et al, 2010; Heley, 2013). According to Luukkonen (2014, page 14) European spatial planning thus “forms an informal networked space of Europeanization” and therefore “enables its articulation in terms of common ‘European space’ or the ‘EU territory’.”

What we are concerned about more in this paper is how such soft spaces can emerge and be deployed to address, challenge, and ‘open up’ difficult and politically sensitive issues around identity and territory and spatial imaginaries, particularly with regards to European integration and how spatial planning and governance is being used as a means through which reterritorialization at the macroregional scale is being managed.

3 European integration and territoriality

Soft spaces emerged as a response to tensions around territorial and relational space in spatial planning. However, such tensions are not unique to planning contexts; they are found in other sectors and areas of governance, and are most notably a component of European integration.

Questions of territorial and relational space in the context of European integration are highly complex and sensitive for two main reasons. First, the *polity* of European integration is characterized by a tension between nation-state territoriality and some supranational mandates on the EU level. Second, we see a high heterogeneity on the *policy* level. In some policy fields—like the environmental policy or the European Single Market—we can identify clearly supranational features; in others—in particular, in the field of spatial planning—there are no transposed mandates. In both contexts, soft spaces have emerged to handle certain complex, cross-territorial and asymmetric situations or they are used as a tool in strategic ambitions about competence ‘gaining and keeping’.

To start with the *polity* dimension: despite the strength of some EU supranational competences, the EU’s territoriality cannot simply be understood as a parallel to the Westphalian state territoriality or as a superstate. Instead, we see a hybrid setting of a few hard elements (in particular, with regard to external border control) and predominating soft elements. Many authors understand this as a predominating intergovernmental organization of a ‘pooled territory’ (Bialasiewicz et al, 2005; Mammadouh, 2001; Pullano, 2009). The European citizenship is a good example as it relies exclusively on the national affiliation of individuals: one has to belong to a nation-state before one can be considered as an EU citizen.

Others stress the ‘soft’ territorial character of EU integration as “aspirational in terms of a space of values and an area of solidarity” that should not be captured in a clear territorial way (Scott and van Houtum, 2009, pages 271, 273).

Secondly, from the *policy* perspective, no explicit EU mandate has been established yet with regard to spatial planning. Some see the objective of ‘Territorial Cohesion’ anchored as shared competence in the Lisbon Treaty as a new and formal basis for the development of such a mandate (eg, Faludi, 2010a). In the meantime, the EU Commission has published a Green Book that has posed questions to stakeholders and member states on how to concretize the objective of territorial cohesion. The public consultation process has brought much inspiration, but little clarity (cf COM, 2009). In other policy fields we see explicit European mandates that are highly relevant from a territorial perspective, but which are not coordinated in a territorial, European way—the Common Agriculture Policy or the Transeuropean Networks are just two examples in this respect (see Dammers and Evers, 2008). This setting has to be understood from a multilevel perspective: for example, EU financial support can prioritize certain objectives whilst, on the *polity* level, the autonomy of national, regional, and local authorities can be limited by European regulation. However, initiatives of national, regional and local bodies can also draw upon European funding and regulation to help deliver the ‘by-passing’ domestic opponents (see Böhme and Waterhout, 2008; Clark and Jones, 2009; Radaelli, 2003).

Against this background, Deas and Lord (2006) identified a growing number of ‘unusual’ or nonstandard regions around cooperative arrangements established by INTERREG and other programmes highlighting the tensions between national and regional territory and the European motor of spatial integration and policy (Faludi, 2009). Luukkonen sees territorialization of the EU as an interplay of rescaling between different levels occurring through “everyday practices of policymakers such as European spatial planners ... at the ‘lower levels’ as well as through ‘high politics’” (2014, page 15). Scrutinizing European spatial planning as a field of interaction, he further concludes that the “idea of ‘Europe’ as a spatial entity ... contributes significantly to the production of the territory of the EU” (page 14). Soft spaces and soft forms of territorial/spatial governance have been and continue to be one way in which this tension is managed and played out. Macroregional strategies such as the Baltic Sea and Danube regions provide early examples of such strategic soft spaces (Knieling, 2011; Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; Stead, 2011).

One way to capture the emergence, use, and fissiparous nature of soft spaces of EU integration is to propose an analytical framework against which to compare and contrast the reality of practices. In order to understand political processes and dynamics, including hidden agendas, actor coalitions, etc, we have to consider a differentiated system of territorial categories. This is particularly the case given the logic of integration underpinning the European Union as a construction ‘sui generis’, without archetype and without predictable outcomes.

In the following parts of the paper we discuss the Europeanization of territoriality and what role soft spaces play in our understanding of this process. Our analytical framework is based upon three territoriality categories that provide a heuristic against which to compare the concrete case studies of the Europeanization of territory that follow.

The first category we label as ‘*nonterritoriality*’. Nonterritoriality is relevant if there is no formal mandate for a political task with regard to spatial development. In practice this means that a mandate for a certain policy field at the EU level does not exist, is not addressed, or is neglected. Thus, as long as no formal EU mandate exists, EU territoriality cannot take effect. Fiscal policy is a typical example as the nation-states apply their own rules within their territory. Of course, differences in fiscal regulations are highly relevant for spatial development (eg, commuting in border regions), but this form of spatiality does not question the political principle of national territoriality.

As soon as political mandates are transposed to the intergovernmental European level, we enter the second category of *pooled territoriality*. Sovereignty remains with the nation-states as ‘building blocks’: this is as true in the institutional as in the territorial sense. This intergovernmental logic reflects the metatheory of intergovernmentalism based upon the notion that European integration should not or cannot overcome national sovereignty. This can be applied for spatial planning at the current state, but also for other policy fields. Good examples of this kind of policy are the Schengen Regulations. These regulations are based exclusively on national competences and they are managed by nation-state authorities. The role of the Commission is to focus on data management. (This is not to confuse it with the supranational character of the above-mentioned Frontex mandate that addresses the *external* borders.)

The third category we label as *supraterritoriality*, capturing those cases where the political mandate and power is located on the EU level, overriding (inter)national mandates. The supranational organization of mandates initiates a supranational territoriality and can limit national sovereignty. The European Single Market serves as an example: thousands of technical regulations have to be considered which are linked with juridical sanctions which can be enforced by the European Court of Justice (eg, interdiction of certain customs, mandatory public procurement procedures). This refers to the second metatheory of European integration, (neo)functionalism that assumes that in the long run European integration necessarily leads to ever-more integration and in the end to the supranational state.

This threefold classification provides a framework for the different territorial dimensions of EU integration, though there is a further dimension that needs to be included. Analyses within spatial development highlight the dynamic nature of soft spaces as they evolve to take on new dimensions and characteristics (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Chilla et al, 2012; Haughton and Allmendinger, 2010). Such evolution reflects the flexible and ephemeral nature of such hybrid spaces as a result of changes in their policy scope (eg, the inclusion or exclusion of transport and environmental issues) or territorial domain. In other words, there is a temporal dimension over which territoriality evolves, including future trajectories and possibilities. A policy’s reorganization can mean the shift from one kind of territoriality to another. The ‘upward’ dynamic is fuelled by the transposition of political mandates. The downwards dynamic can be triggered by the retrieval of political mandates.

This latter development must be regarded as exceptional, but discussions around the future of the Euro illustrate this: the Euro states could agree to withdraw from the common currency—either to nonterritoriality with the renationalization of the currencies or to a pooled territoriality based on currency peg. Both directions, either upwards or downwards, are forms of reterritorialization.

4 From the analytical to the empirical

The following two case studies are explorative empirical arguments that aim to illustrate and test the framework developed above. The engagement between the analytical and experiences is based on the involvement of the authors in a series of research projects related more or less directly to the questions addressed here. We draw upon two experiences of the Europeanization of territory—the Habitats Directive (HD) and Macro Regional Strategies (MRS). We have chosen these case studies in order to cover the wide range of current constellations in Europeanized territoriality. They involve territorial questions of formally institutionalized policies (HD) and more informal ones (MRS); they cover political processes of quite a long period (HD since the 1980s) and very recent ones (MRS for less than a decade); they involve the EU/EC without originally having explicit mandates (HD) and the EU as coordinator explicitly invited by national authorities (MRS). The two case studies at hand enable us to explore the temporalities of territoriality in two very different cases. Both cases are examples of new, provocative soft spaces that challenge and reterritorialize areas and perimeters.

4.1 Habitats Directive

The HD is the main basis of EU nature conservation policy and is the legal basis for the protection of fauna, flora, and habitats in all EU member states. The HD was enacted in 1992, after considerable political bargaining. Today, more than 10% of the European territory is protected by the HD regime that unfolds relatively strong consequences in spatial planning and territorial development (Alphandéry and Fortier, 2001; Chilla, 2005; Gibbs et al, 2007).

The starting point of this policy tool lies in the late 1980s when dissatisfaction with political power constellations was felt in two groups—within the European Commission and from protagonists of environmental policy. Firstly, within the European Commission there was a strong ambition for more supranational competences in the field of nature conservation, where EU competence was absent, with the exception of the Birds Directive from 1979 that had shown hardly any effect until the 1990s. Environmental, policy-specific motivations certainly played their role but, given the rotation logic of the personnel within the Commission, the policy-specific ambitions were completed by general political power questions and polity concerns.

Secondly, on the national and regional level throughout Europe many policy experts on the fields of the environment felt a certain frustration about environmental policy in general. Despite a considerable degree of institutionalization of environmental and nature conservation policy, the effectiveness in concrete planning conflicts was seen to be rather weak. In the course of the political bargaining on the HD, both these groups got together within a structural coalition, by-passing the resisting powers mainly on the national level.

This coalition turned out to be effective. The first phase of policy formulation was characterized by a deterritorialization strategy. Within the official discourse, spatial differentiation was largely absent. Discursive references to the pan-European heritage remained diffuse from a territorial point of view. In background negotiations, it was not easy to convince sceptical member states to adapt the competence transfer—and here ‘territorial othering’ came into play: For example, Germany was persuaded to support the HD with the argument that there would be few consequences for the country well known for its high

environmental ambitions. It was argued that the intention was to upgrade nature conservation policies of the—at that time—new southern European member states [the so-called ‘Club Med’ considered to have limited ambitions in environmental policy; (see Chilla, 2005)]. From a juridical point of view, this argument was meaningless, but it was politically effective.

In parallel, the institutional setting was institutionalized through the HD, in parts somehow hidden in its annexes that comprise long lists of species to be protected throughout Europe, regardless of territorial belonging (HD Annex I–V). Moreover, biogeographical regions were installed (HD Article 1 c iii). However, the procedural regulations remained unclear at that time and member states were unaware of the juridical meaning of the long appendices of the HD. In this sense, the policy formulation can be seen as a discursive deterritorialization. This phase can be interpreted as ‘deterritorialized biology’: biological arguments of nature conservation were put forward, detached from their (bio)geographical meaning.

After the adoption of the HD in 1992, the implementation process started only slowly, as the national adaptation came along with delays in most countries. In the years after, more and more conflicts came up: in particular, between environmental/biological arguments on the Commission side, supported by environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOS) from all levels, and the nonenvironmental arguments from subnational levels like regional planning authorities or national economic lobbying. This is where the second phase started that we consider as the reterritorialization phase. The prescriptions of the HD were taken very seriously, and the hitherto soft elements unfold surprisingly efficient consequences: this is particularly true for site selection processes where the protection of the annexes’ species turned out to be juridically coercive: the Commission and the European Court of Justice took this issue surprisingly seriously, considering the hitherto ‘relaxed’ monitoring of environmental implementation processes. Figure 1 illustrates this hardening process.

The negotiations of the site selection processes were not directly negotiated between member states and the Commission. Instead, following the perimeters of the respective biogeographical regions, representatives of the concerned states and the Commission negotiated in different parallel committees. This spatial and institutional reorganization gives

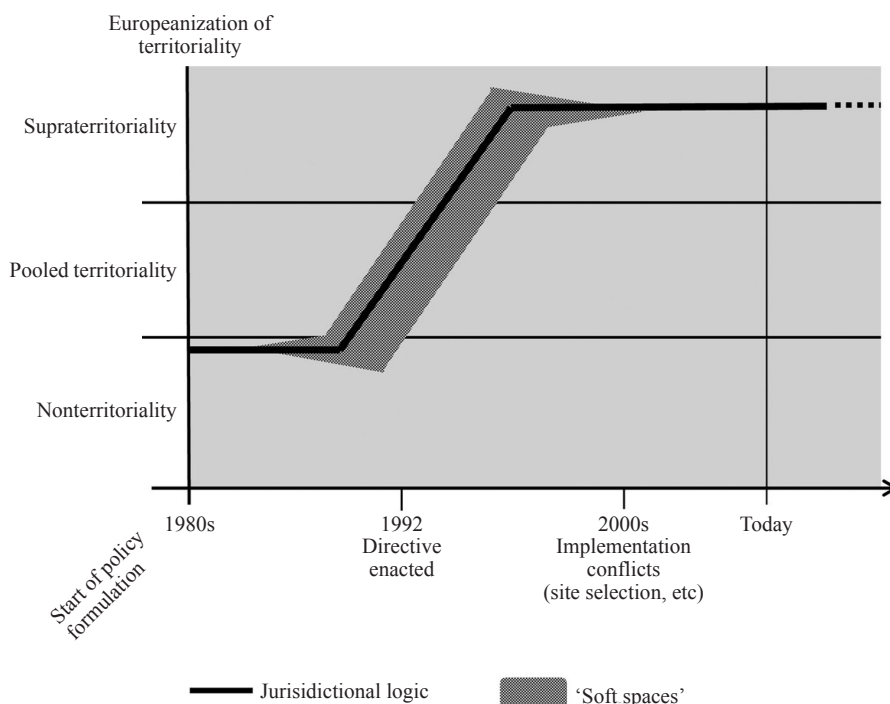


Figure 1. Territorialities and temporalities of the Habitats Directive.

the Commission a powerful role in coordinating and directing the policy development. For the Commission this procedure is efficient as there are fewer biogeographic regions than member states. The states face a considerable complexity: France, for example, is part of four of these regions (the Atlantic, Continental, Mediterranean, and Alpine biogeographic regions). Despite the legislative anchorage of the biogeographic regions they are soft spaces as they constitute technically driven, functional planning spaces that cross territorial boundaries. Latterly, the political importance of these regions has diminished. They remain the technical reference, but political negotiations ended with the completion of the site selection process.

As a result, the key actors' aims of the early phase were achieved: both the supranational institutions and the environmental policy concerns saw an important shift in competences and power. Reterritorialization processes, based on temporarily soft spaces, were a key concept of this strategy.

4.2 The case of the macroregions

Macroregions have emerged as a new form of European territorial cooperation within the budget period 2006–13 in regions with so-called 'common geographical characteristics' (Dubois et al, 2009; Samecki, 2009). MRS were developed as intergovernmental initiatives aimed at reinforcing international cooperation. Within the Baltic Sea Region the idea for the development of a joint MRS arose in 2005. In the course of a changing geopolitical configuration after the EU Eastern enlargement and an increasing eutrophication of the Baltic Sea an interregional working group of the European Parliament took up the idea of a strategic cooperation (Antola, 2009; Schymik, 2011). In 2007 an 'experimental' phase of macroregions started, when the European Commission was mandated to develop the first MRS in order to set new impulses to the already-existing institutional setting (see figure 2).

The institutionalization process in the Baltic area was surprisingly quick: due to the priorities of several EU presidencies the European Parliament adopted the strategy in 2009. Several stakeholder groups strongly supported the development of macroregions for different reasons. Two inducements played an important role for the stakeholders: many stakeholders

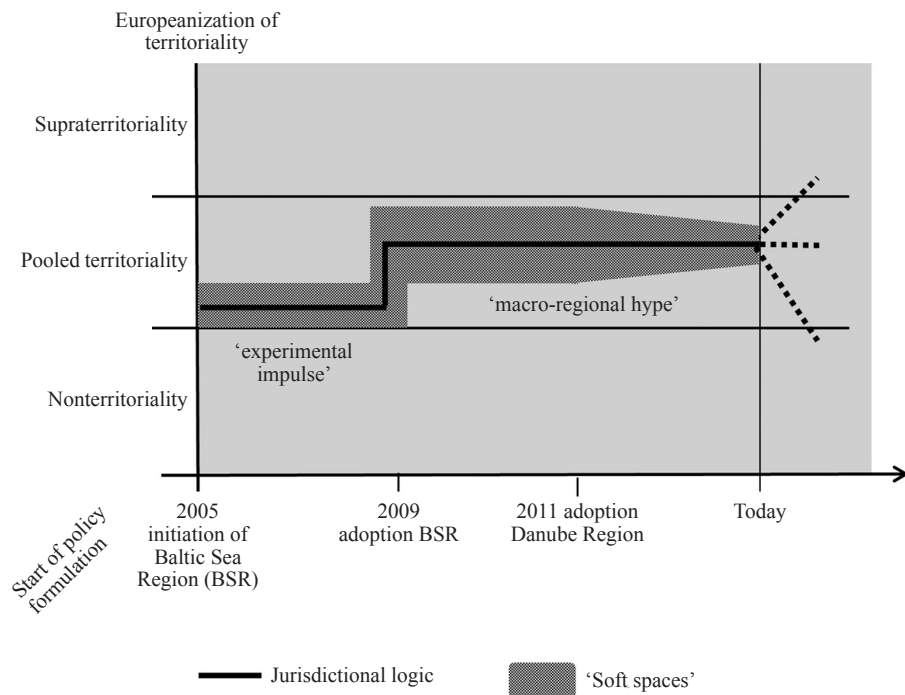


Figure 2. Territorialities and temporalities of the Macroregional Strategies.

were not satisfied with the setting of cross-border and transnational cooperation (eg, water purification control). There was a search “for a spatial or territorial framework for these policies to fit into” (Faludi, 2010b, page 6). Policy makers on the national and EU levels expressed their dissatisfaction with the existing instruments and complained about missing instruments for joint actions within their geographical focus. The European Commission, more explicitly the Directorate General for Regional Policy, had shown signs of frustration considering the output of regional policies and had difficulties in successfully competing for competences in internal power plays. National representatives were unsatisfied with the international cooperation perimeters available and at the subnational level private stakeholders and project partners in particular missed recognition and political support for long-term actions (Sielker, 2012).

At this stage the pooled territoriality principle is applied as national and regional representatives developed the strategies within their respective mandates. Supranational elements can be seen in the Commission’s role preparing the consultation process and parliamentary adoption. Summarizing the first phase, macroregions can be termed ‘soft spaces’ that were developed between different layers of decision making. The official literature stresses the bottom-up element in the establishment process (COM, 2013). It is true that the initiative started at the member state level, but the strong role in coordinating the establishment process must not be underestimated. During the phase of implementation the national representatives, however, gained importance.

Following the idea of the first MRS, tremendous political interest in this new tool arose on the national level—in most cases for the reason of policy influence (eg, shipping, harbour infrastructure) and on the EU level in particular for the reason of integration challenges with regard to new member states. The Baltic Sea Region Strategy triggered a macroregional ‘hype’ as many regions debated their own potential in this respective (Bialiasewicz et al, 2013; Dühr, 2011). In the early phase the so-called three ‘nos’—postulating the absence of (1) financial, (2) institutional, and (3) legislative changes—underline the political sensitivity of macroregions (Schneidewind, 2011).

Macroregions are implemented through multilateral committees that sit alongside formal institutions and operate within existing frameworks (Sielker, 2012). The key governance elements are so-called Priority Areas addressing different policy fields. Voting members are national representatives that give an observing status to the Commission, and private and semipublic stakeholders. The implementation mode, thus, builds on an intergovernmental model and does not lead to supraterritoriality. The Priority Areas are soft in the sense that they are constantly open to diverse stakeholders and operate in flexible and sometimes overlapping spatial foci (Sielker, 2012). Within the different actions in each Priority Area, a multitude of actor constellations and different geographical boundaries can be relevant (Stead, 2011, page 165). The macroregions also include ‘hard’ elements, as the goals agreed upon in Steering Groups have to be decided and implemented by, for example, national ministries or other committees of funding schemes. During the preparation and implementation process a “growing readiness for ‘soft’ reforms is evident” (Schymik, 2011, page 6). The macroregional concept has shown first signs of ‘hardening’” (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012) as, for example, the newly developed committees developed different steps of institutionalization depending on working modes and engagement of nation-state representatives in the Steering Groups. One reaction towards the macroregional development is the development of a Danube Region INTERREG programme area. However, the principle of pooling domestic territory is not put into question by a new INTERREG programme organization.

The dissatisfaction discussed above has led to the different stakeholder groups being in a constant search for arenas to enforce their objectives. In both the Baltic Sea Region and

the Danube Region we see a ‘success’ of certain policy priorities on the general political agenda through the changing interplay of stakeholders at the macroregional level. In the case of the Danube Region the focus on the river, for example, led to an increased agreement and prominence of objectives to increase the shipping on the Danube. In the case of the Baltic Sea Region the macroregional development provoked an increasing attention of the wider public towards the problems of eutrophication, leading to the increasing popularity of existing policy actions and initiation of new policy actions, making the missing instruments and perimeters more visible.

In parallel, the Directorate General obtained the possibility to take credit for new cooperation initiatives in which they appear in a new managing role without tying up substantially more resources. At the same time, the responsibility for the success and the implementation lies in the hands of the nation-states. Interestingly, the diversity of objectives pursued by different stakeholder groups is not fully obvious. The European Commission aims at more European competences; the national representatives pursue intergovernmental cooperation agendas; and the stakeholders of certain sectors (eg, International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River within the Danube Region) aim at an increasing policy influence in informal networks. All three stakeholder groups, however, seem to be able to address their needs through a gradual reterritorialization process.

We expect the ‘macroregional era’ to continue, though the development paths of macroregions in Europe are not exactly foreseeable—and might vary between the regions (eg, speed of development, degree of institutionalization, or topics addressed). One development path could be a ‘supranationalization’ where MRS are first steps of a rescaling process towards a supranational level to which competences will be allocated (Faludi, 2010c; Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; Stead, 2011; Welz and Engel, 1993). A second, very likely, scenario is the continuation of macroregions to ‘intergovernmental superregions’ coming along with a further allocation of resources. In the coming years the scope for assigning further competences to the macroregional framework would not imply leaving the intergovernmental logic. A third development path would imply the continuation of the ‘status quo’ where macroregions are established as a permanent cooperation and constitute an umbrella for other EU initiatives with the soft characteristics as the dominant ones.

5 Conclusions

If we compare both cases presented (HD and MRS), we see parallels and differences. The starting point in both cases was political dissatisfaction and different actors’ ambitions to increase the political influence on a certain level and for certain policy priorities. In both cases soft spaces played an important strategic role. In the case of the HD, the phase of deterritorialization, of spatial ‘tabooing’, was of key importance particularly in the first phase. Biogeographical regions were very soft in the beginning and are detailed in the implementation phase only after the formal competences shifted. This can be contrasted with the development of macroregional processes where territorial arguments played a prominent role throughout the process that institutionally establishes regions with so-called common geographical challenges. The soft character was of importance when building a governance structure and deciding upon the Priority Areas and goals. In both cases, though having a different emphasis on territorialization processes, reterritorialization turns out to be very efficient throughout the policy process, based on ‘soft spaces’. The biogeographical regions and in particular the ‘functionally coercive’ annexes of the HD turn out to influence spatial development in Europe in a very efficient way. The macroregional development within in Europe has already changed the perception of some regions and influences: for example, the allocation of the INTERREG budgets’ organization after 2013.

As soon as the strategy is efficient, new perimeters, new agendas, and new actor constellations occur. In parallel, soft spaces can ‘harden’ (MRS as INTERREG perimeter) and/or they lose their political relevance (biogeographical spaces today as only technical reference). In the case of nature conservation policy, the strategy has turned out to be efficient; in the case of the MRS, the ‘success’ is not yet finally to be seen, but there are clear signs that MRSs are unlikely to vanish from the political agenda again.

The two explorative case studies here indicate that soft spaces can be very efficient instruments with regard to power plays and ambitions for competence transfer in the context of European integration. In that sense, our examples highlight the complex, evolving, and contested nature of reterritorialization of European space and how such new spaces can unsettle, challenge, and disrupt existing, national territorial spaces.

Summarizing the two case studies presented we can identify three perspectives that are crucial for the understanding of soft spaces in the context of European integration: the new spaces of European territoriality are characterized by, first, *temporal dynamics*; second, the *parallel existence* with ‘hard’ spaces; and, finally, they can be employed as a *political tool*. Firstly, soft spaces are very much characterized by *temporalities* due to the dynamic political development. As we saw in the example of the macroregions, at a certain point of the political process the softness of the early years can harden, but this hardening can turn into softening again. It is important to note that there is no automatic logic of hardening and no one-way dynamic: soft spaces are object to political negotiations with an open end—they are part of contemporary reterritorialization processes.

Secondly, we see a persisting *parallelism* of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ spaces also in the context of European integration. The example of the macroregions demonstrates that an intense debate on soft spaces does not necessarily modify or weaken the hard spaces of domestic planning. The territorial and relational features of such new spaces can coexist and develop dynamically. This is particularly true for phases of ‘opening up’ when the relational features get more prominent. As we see in the case of the biogeographical regions, there is a process of ‘closing down’ when soft spaces undergo a process of hardening.

Finally, soft spaces are not only an outcome of political processes, but they can also be employed as a *political tool*, be it intentionally or not. They can be an efficient element in political bargaining of political competences and power.

This paper has presented a heuristic on the basis of ex-post case-study analyses. Obviously, further empirical testing has to be the next step, taking an in-vivo perspective in contemporary processes of reterritorialization. We feel that a focus upon the significance and import of existing and emerging new spaces of planning would be fruitful, highlighting how European reterritorialization is impacting upon the outcomes, or not, of national and subnational competences and spatial planning. Such processes may help explain some of the role of new spaces in national political displacement and disruption.

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