

**A view from the mountains:  
National involvement in Southeast European regionalization**

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Celebration, optimism, and hope were the words that echoed in the international community when six countries of Southeast Europe (SEE)—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia—signed a commitment to regional cooperation for conservation and sustainable development at the scale of the Dinaric Arc mountain region. Hosted by the Slovenian Government in conjunction with the 2008 Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the ‘Big Win for Dinaric Arc’ event was framed as one of the most significant gatherings of these countries over the past two decades. In the resulting Joint Statement, the signatories recognized “the importance of regional cooperation to achieve transboundary sustainable management of the South-Eastern European region” and “agreed to mutual cooperation, exchange of experiences and coordinated actions in sustainable management of the Dinaric Arc ecoregion” (WWF 2008). According to the official report, “the Big Win for Dinaric Arc event radiated with a lot of positive energy and hope for an improved situation regarding nature conservation in the region.” Yet today, concrete outcomes are few and far between, while the prospects of regional cooperation are highly uncertain. What happened to this window of opportunity?

The level of enthusiasm at the Big Win event was emblematic of several trends that augured well for a mountain convention in SEE. The gathering came on the heels of almost two decades of international mountain agenda setting (Rudaz 2011). In 1992, mountains were enshrined in Chapter 13 of Agenda 21; in 1998, the UN General Assembly designated 2002 as the International Year of Mountains (IYM); and in 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg led to the establishment of the international Mountain Partnership (Price and Hofer, 2005). Furthermore, existing regional mountain initiatives, notably the Alpine Convention (in force since 1995) and the Carpathian Convention (in force since 2006), directly and indirectly encouraged similar approaches. Finally, numerous organizations such as the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development had actively disseminated insights into the benefits of scaling collective action to mountain regions (Church 2010). In Europe, the Carpathians, the Alps, the Caucasus, and the Dinaric Alps were framed as important ‘ecoregions’ by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or ‘hotspots of biodiversity’ by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Hopes were thus high that an international legal agreement for cooperation in the SEE mountain region would emerge in the same fashion as the Alpine and the Carpathian Conventions. These hopes have been dashed, as lingering bilateral conflicts and territorial disputes overpower the regional cooperation incentives (Andrian & Gaudry, 2001); some countries of the region failed to sign the subsequent Resolution on the Dinaric Arc Region cooperation, which was intended to pave a way to a Convention (UNEP ISCC 2010); the ‘Dinaric Arc and Balkans Environment Outlook’ (DABEO) assessment process, which was to involve most SEE countries, was aborted; several countries object to the use of the term ‘Balkans’ in framing any regional initiative; and Bulgaria and Greece were not convinced of the mountain region’s contiguity from their viewpoint. Furthermore, an ever-growing number of regional initiatives and emerging discussions on different regional orders are pulling national loyalties in different directions. For instance, one subset of SEE countries has been designated as the ‘Western Balkans’ under the EU Stabilization and Association Process initiated in

2003. Just as the Big Win event seemingly crystallized regional cooperation around the SEE mountain ranges, some of the signatory states have set their eyes on the Danube macro-region and the Danube-Black Sea Region, while preparations for an Adriatic-Ionian macro-regional strategy involves yet another group of countries.

Against this background, we examine in depth the dynamics contributing to windows of opportunity for the emergence of regional cooperation at the scale of a transboundary mountain region. Our intention is to provide an understanding of why the largely favorable international environment for mountain initiatives failed to produce a tangible outcome in Southeast Europe, and to characterize the reasons for the persisting uncertainty.

At the most general level, we argue that in order for a mutually agreed and institutionalized mountain initiative to see the light of day, several factors need to be in place, at the right time, and in the right combination. In order to do this, we propose an analytical framework that evolves around the concepts region, scale, and frame. Social scientists, especially constructivist-minded human geographers, have long theorized and applied these concepts. We build on their work but suggest that instead of mobilizing any one of them individually, their co-constitutive interdependence requires that they be considered conjointly, which in turn warrants increased attention to historical contextuality. The article thus seeks to make two distinct contributions. Empirically, we contribute to the literature on regional environmental governance through a detailed analysis of Southeast European regionalization. Theoretically, we engage recent debates about region, scale, and frame, proposing a previously neglected dimension of their relational nature.

The article is structured as follows. In Section 2 we provide a brief overview of recent theoretical work concerning region, scale, and frame, with a special emphasis on their relational aspects, and propose an approach to consider these concepts together. Although inspired by the literatures cited in that section, this approach emerged from our in-depth engagement with the empirical material, rather than a readily available analytical template. Section 3 includes our empirical findings—based on extensive personal interviews and analysis of primary and secondary sources—organized around the three possible conceptual dyads, region-frame, scale-frame and region-scale. In section 4, we bring these dyads together and consider the region-scale-frame triad in its historical context to summarize how and why the necessary elements for a regional mountain initiative in SEE were misaligned. We conclude with some final thoughts on the limitations of our analysis.

### **Region, Scale, and Frame**

Contemporary studies of transboundary governance invariably make reference to the concepts of region, scale, and frame. Although some scholars have suggested that inconsistent use of the terms risks undermining the usefulness of scale (Brenner 2001) or region (Neumann 2009), their application remains ubiquitous across the social sciences (Agnew 2012 for region, MacKinnon 2010 for scale, de Vreese 2012 for frame). Definitions and ontological positions indeed vary considerably; however, two related features are increasingly shared, especially among geographers and to a lesser extent political scientists (Balsiger and VanDeveer 2012). The first concerns their mobilization in the context of constructivist approaches, where scholars argue that regions, scales, and frames have no objective existence independent from the actors

that create them (Debarbieux 2012). The second feature consists in their relational nature, which means that regions, scales, and frames are to be understood not on the basis of any inherent characteristics, but in terms of their relation to other social processes. Below, we briefly review current uses of the three concepts, outline why they should always be considered together, and note a number of empirical implications we take into account in the empirical sections of the article.

The term region is at the center of much recent work in human geography (Agnew 2012; Paasi 2010) and political science (Balsiger and VanDeveer 2010). While traditional regional studies in international relations typically refer to territories spanning multiple states, geographers have turned their attention to “unusual” regions that often straddle jurisdictional borders (Deas and Lord 2006) or ecoregions such as river basins or mountain ranges (Balsiger 2012).

What is common to these types of regions is that they are socially constructed. Paasi (2010, 2296–7) suggests that this is “nowadays almost axiomatic” but distinguishes between “region as a construct, the end product of a research process” and regions as social practices or discourses that “condition and are conditioned by politics, culture, economics, governance, and power relations.” While the latter, process-based conception is associated with the relational dimension of regions highlighted by several scholars (Allen and Cochrane 2007; Varro and Legendijk 2012; Paasi 2012), others retain a territorial view (Jones and MacLeod 2004). The stakes of the debate have evolved around interpretations of a specific region (the UK’s South East), yet the debate has wider implications. Our analysis of mountainous areas in Southeast Europe validates both positions. On the one hand, the construction of a SEE mountain region is significantly driven by actors who are not *from* the region (the EU, IGOs, NGOs), and hence the trajectory of region building cannot be understood solely in terms of inherent characteristics of that region. On the other hand, the territorial dimension remains very strong precisely because many of these external actors define the region by resorting to purportedly objective, scientific criteria related to ecosystem functioning.

Scale, the second of our three core concepts, has experienced an explosion of scholarly interest in various scientific disciplines. This interest dates to the early 1990s, when the end of the Cold War and the sudden acceleration of cross-border movements in goods, services, and financial assets (short, globalization) raised the specter of political economic rescaling (e.g. Swyngedouw 1997). Most political scientists have used the notion of scale and the process of rescaling in this sense, designating the local, national, or global scale as hierarchically nested platforms that are linked by vertical or horizontal shifts of authority (Andonova and Mitchell 2010).

Human geographers have been much more interested in constructivist perspectives on the “politics of scale” that shape the outcomes of “an immense range of concrete sociopolitical processes, strategies and struggles” (Brenner 2001, 599; MacLeod 1999). Like region, scale is thus widely recognized as a social construction (Marston 2000; Smith 1984). Moreover, a number of scholars have considered scale in relational terms. Sayre (2005, 281), for instance, has emphasized that “scale is not about the size of things but the spatial and temporal relations among them.” When scale is reified as a category of analysis rather than a category of practice (Moore 2008) and conceived in excessively hierarchical terms (Marston et al. 2005), however,

the concept's explanatory purchase is undermined. By focusing on mountain ranges as a constructed scale of operation that transcends hierarchical scalar systems while dialectically relating to various (equally constructed, or framed) transboundary regions, we seek to obviate the retirement of scale as a concept.

Of the three core concepts we use in this article, frame and the associated practice of framing is perhaps used most widely and uncritically. In common parlance, framing is used synonymously with presenting, describing, or formulating. In a more technical sense, a frame is a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 143), and to frame is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make the more salient in a communicating context” (Entman 1993, 52).

The concept's origins in social movement research carry an overtly strategic element, as a frame is to include a “problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, 52) and the practice relies on the use of a variety of “framing devices” (Benford and Snow 2000). To frame thus presupposes a framing target, which constitutes one among several relational dimensions. In addition to the relation between framing agent and framing target, an important connection exists between frame content and frame environment, which in our context includes region and scale. In other words, a frame as a story line often has a spatial referent, which may be constructed in terms of a region in turn embedded in a scalar system. Framing mountainous areas of Southeast Europe as a trans boundary ecosystem thus constructs it as a region that articulates with other levels (watersheds, river basins) of particular scalar systems.

Each of the three elements in our conceptual triad has been thoroughly integrated in constructivist and (more unevenly) relational perspectives. While we situate our analysis of Southeast European in this theoretical context, we wish to be more precise on what it means to assume a relational stance, for the work referenced above attaches different meanings to the term. In particular, we propose three dimensions of relationality: among the core concepts (analytical relationality), among the observed phenomena (empirical relationality), and between the phenomena and their geopolitical environment (historical relationality).

The significance of analytical and empirical interdependence between important ideas and “geographic totalities” has been noted by Howitt, who suggests that ‘core’ concepts in geography—in his case environment, space, place, and scale—are necessarily implied within the others in “a web of relationships between dialectically intertwined foundational concepts of *co-equal* importance” (1998, 51, emphasis in original). In this article, we adopt the same position for region, scale, and frame and suggest that one cannot be used independently of the others.

Historical relationality refers to the temporally contingent co-constitution of actors and their environment. Prominent among actor-oriented institutionalists, we apply this approach in two steps: in a first step, we bracket one of the three concepts and consider the ramifications of the possible pairs: region-frame, frame-scale, and scale-region. In a second step we consider all three together in light of historical relationality. In the final analysis, we argue that the social construction of region, scale, and frame has to be set in a temporal context, for the process-oriented conceptions of our three core concepts—region building, rescaling, framing—

intersect at particular points in time. These critical junctures (Collier and Collier 1991) serve as entry points into the dialectical relations we wish to uncover; the Big Win event evoked in the introduction is one such juncture. Critical junctures bring into relief the consequences of path dependence, i.e. how past decisions limit current options, even if circumstances have changed. At the same time, our relational approach responds to criticisms that “prevailing models of path dependence overstate the degree of stability in political institutions” (Boas 2007, 34). From this perspective, critical junctures can be windows of opportunity as much as trapdoors of history. Considering region, scale, and frame together in their historical context can thus help us better understand the role of mountains in Southeast European regionalization.

## **Regionalization in Southeast Europe**

### *Region and Frame: the many faces of a region*

The project of constructing and framing the SEE region relates in complex ways to the concurrent state-building processes. Regional cooperation was principally driven by the countries’ goals of EU accession and NATO membership, yet largely ascribed to external agents. The norms set by the EU differed between ‘candidate’ and ‘potential candidate’ countries and split the region into distinctive groupings (Solioz et al. 2012). As Bechev (2006) argues, the EU in this way has shaped “collective politico-geographical identities of the states in SEE.” Three developments illustrate the relation between region and frame: efforts to reframe the Balkan region, resulting regional fragmentation, and the emergence of new regional orders involving subsets of SEE countries. These developments combined to present a considerable challenge to building regional cooperation focusing on the mountain range.

During the last two decades the countries and societies of Southeast Europe have experienced extensive turmoil and profound transformations, challenging protagonists and observers alike to reimagine the Balkans. The fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in a period of radical political changes, intense crisis, and destabilization for Central and Eastern Europe. The Yugoslav federation went through a violent breakup, giving rise to six new countries. The ideology that preserved regional peace for over fifty years crashed and the negative connotations of the term ‘Balkans’ reappeared in popular and political parlance (Todorova 2009).

In the late 1990s, numerous international actors led by the EU actively sought to promote the idea of a SEE region as a frame that would be more conciliatory and inclusive with regard to the countries between the southern borders of Austria and Hungary on one side, and the western border of Turkey on the other (Bechev 2006). The SEE frame was institutionalized with the launching of the Stability Pact (SP) in 1999, an international, multifaceted effort to strengthen peace, democracy, human rights, economy, and advance region-building. Today, all SEE governments embrace EU integration as a strategic priority, although progress and enthusiasm remains uneven. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Southeast Europe’s multiple and evolving regional framings have thus increasingly centered on the process of European integration. A rather large number of countries in a relatively small territory were moving towards EU accession at varying speeds, with Slovenia reaching this goal in 2004, and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. As a consequence, the EU redefined the SEE project. It continued engagement with the transition states and formulated the

Stabilization and Association process for the countries of the ‘Western Balkans,’ the official term assigned to the former Yugoslav republics (except Slovenia) and Albania.

In parallel to the regional segmentation produced by European integration, a number of complementary subregional framings were emerging. One of these evolved around the Sava River, once Yugoslavia's largest river and now an international river basin encompassing large parts of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and a small part of Albania (Matic 2011). In 2002, four of these countries signed the Framework Agreement on the Sava River Basin, an initiative of the Stability Pact designed to support cooperation on the basis of, and in accordance with the EU Water Framework Directive.

Transnational environmental resources in SEE have offered many opportunities to foster international cooperation. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) there are thirteen shared river basins and four lake basins (UNEP/GRID-Arendal 2007). The Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) identified eight priority sites for nature protection (UNEP-ISCC 2010) and WWF and IUCN six transboundary areas (Erg et al. 2012). Most important to the focus of this article, mountain ranges such as the Dinaric Alps, began to be employed to frame sub-regional entities.

Using the concept of ‘ecoregion’ promoted by the WWF, the Dinaric Arc Initiative (DAI) launched in 2007 brought together numerous international actors—WWF, International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Regional Environment Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNEP, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Council of Europe, European Nature Heritage Fund (Euronatur), European Centre for Nature Conservation (ECNC), and SNV (and international development NGO of Dutch origins)— in a broad framework of collaboration for long-term conservation and sustainable development of the region (WWF 2007). DAI comprises portions of the West Balkans countries, Slovenia, and Italy.

Highlighting the intergovernmental dimension of rivers and lakes, externally driven efforts have resulted in several intergovernmental agreements. The Skadar Lake Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Albania and Montenegro (2003); the Ohrid Lake agreement between Albania and Macedonia (officially called Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, FYROM (2004); and the Prespa Lake trilateral agreement between Albania, FYROM and Greece (2010). Gathering these individual outcomes into a larger framing of the Global Water Partnership, the memorandum of understanding was signed by the five Drin River Riparian states of Albania, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Macedonia in 2011, producing yet another sub-regional framing in SEE.

This spread of regional and subregional divisions is taking place in the shadow of spatial reordering at the higher level of the European space. The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), a multilateral political and economic initiative to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity involves twelve countries including the SEE states of Albania and Serbia. The Danube and Black Sea Task Force was set up in 2001 to provide a platform for cooperation and coherent employment of the Danube River Protection

Convention and the Black Sea Convention. In 2007, the European Commission put forward ‘the Black Sea Synergy,’ a regional initiative denoting the Danube Cooperation Process as the link between the EU and the Black Sea region.

A further division of the SEE region occurred as a result of some countries' dual association with SEE and Carpathian Convention membership, as well as combined approaches to the Carpathian and Danube regions. In 1998, for example, the newly established WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme created the “Blue river, green mountains” initiative covering all or parts of the territory of 18 countries, including most of SEE. In 2010 the Interim Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention was invited to join the consultation process on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which in turn opened a discussion on a possible Carpathian macro-regional strategy that could involve Serbia in the larger context of the Danube region.

When the European Council endorsed the Danube Strategy in 2011, it invited actors to “continue work in cooperation with the Commission on possible future macro-regional strategies, in particular regarding the Adriatic and Ionian region” (European Council, 2011). The Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII) was established in 2000 by the six coastal countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia. The Italian government plans to launch the Adriatic-Ionian macro-regional strategy in 2014, during the Italian and Greek presidencies. Croatia proposes its territory as the link between the two macro-regions (Stocchiero, 2010), and Serbia even though a non-maritime country has also shown an interest in assuming such an intermediate role (Interview May 6, 2012).

Region-building efforts during this period also built on the mountain frame. Instigated in 2004, the UNEP regional office in Vienna supported the establishment of the Balkan Mountain Initiative (Ramcilovic 2009) with a view to fostering a legal instrument similar to what evolved in the Carpathians. While the ‘Balkan Convention’ did not materialize, the success of DAI and the Big Win following the introduction of the Dinaric Arc ecoregion motivated UNEP, in partnership with the Slovenian government, to initiate in 2009 the negotiation process for the Dinaric Arc Resolution as a potential frame to move discussions in a new direction: away from SEE as a political region to SEE as a mountain region; as we will elaborate below this negotiation process culminated in a regional meeting in 2011 where Serbia’s withdrawal from the process reinforced the insecurity overshadowing SEE mountain governance.

Considering all these transboundary initiatives through the lens of frame and region reveals that although they shared the common objective of promoting intergovernmental cooperation throughout SEE, the EU and international organizations brought about substantial confusion of regional orderings. The dominant EU accession framing separated the Western Balkans from the rest; the EU’s and other IOs’ employment of shared water resources management argumentations and other ecosystemic approaches further subdivided the region, or appropriated parts of the SEE into wider EU regional assemblies.

National authorities caught in the maelstrom of SEE reordering were impelled to deliberate on the opportunities and challenges of various sub-regional identities, while at the same time confronted with the emergence of several supra-regional entities and processes. These diverse and sometimes competing regional frames pulled national



loyalties in different directions, making it difficult for mountain governance to gain a foothold.

*Frame and scale: seeing the mountains beyond/for biodiversity*

Europe's mountains are found to be important with regard to water supply, cultural and biological diversity, tourism, and sensitivity to environmental change (Schuler et al. 2004). Concerns for biodiversity have resonated in the SEE region for some time. Indeed, regional biodiversity cooperation in SEE was institutionalized through focal points for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and other global biodiversity treaties at an early stage. As a consequence, the mountain focus promoted by the international mountain agenda and spatially defined by a global map produced by UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) was marginalized. In what follows, we move from the connection between region and frame to that between frame and scale, illustrating how these two concepts similarly need to be considered in conjunction.

In order to lend strength to the emerging global mountain agenda, it was necessary to develop a common definition and identify the worldwide distribution of mountains. In the late 1990s, this task was taken up by UNEP-WCMC, a global actor operating at the interface between science and policy. This work culminated in 2000 with the publication of a simple definition, a transparent methodology, and a global map of mountain forests and mountain areas. Reflecting the report's acceptance, the European Commission asked NORDREGIO to prepare a study using this methodology to delineate the mountain areas of Europe for the purpose of policy support to national governments (Schuler et al. 2004). The same approach was also used for the elaboration of the DABEO, which contained a proposal for the geographic extent of SEE's mountain areas (Djordjevic submitted 2012). These efforts to specify mountains' scalar quality for the first time provided a scientific basis for framing policy development; however, the institutional environment turned out to be less receptive than expected.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was opened for signature at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Slovenia, Serbia, and Croatia signed the Convention in Rio and ratified it in 1996, 2002, and 1996, respectively; all other SEE countries except Kosovo have acceded to the Convention. Currently each SEE signatory has a sizable team around its national CBD focal point, which regularly participates in meetings of the CBD and related biodiversity conventions on wetlands (Ramsar) and international trade in endangered species (CITES). Exchange and cooperation under the biodiversity framing takes place in regional contexts at global and regional events. Equally important, national focal points and their teams are engaged at the sub-regional level, particularly with regard to transboundary protected areas (TBPAs).

A strong point of the initiatives framed around biodiversity, in comparison with many other policy issues, is that strategic instruments such as national biodiversity action plans generate projects on the ground at a sub-regional level. The TBPAs reinforce both biodiversity focus and the regional CBD institutional cooperation framework. Among the priority TBPAs in SEE, at least six are found in the mountain ranges. The establishment of TBPAs typically entails extensive cooperation and coordination between municipal stakeholders, national administrations, and international actors

(WWF, IUCN, EU, UNEP). Implementation of international agreements at such scale thus builds bottom-up support to regional initiatives, incites top-down support of governments, and further reinforces the institutional architecture focused on biodiversity conservation. The biodiversity framing not only facilitates the transfer of information and knowledge across borders, but also between vertical levels of governance.

Framing transnational cooperation at the ecoregional scale aligns well with ‘Natura 2000,’ the centerpiece of EU nature and biodiversity policy established under the 1992 Habitats Directive. The ‘Emerald Network’ was envisaged under the Bern Convention as a supplement to the ‘Natura 2000 Network’ in non-EU countries. As of 2005, the European Environment Agency and the Council of Europe put in place a programme to identify so-called Areas of Special Conservation Interest and facilitate establishment of national networks of protected areas in the countries of the Western Balkans.

Since biodiversity is directly relevant to sustainable mountain development, the presence of institutional resources for the former could be expected to support the latter; within the CBD, mountains are even addressed in a special programme of work on mountain biological diversity. However, the lack of adequate capacity on the part of national administrations has constituted a challenge rather than opportunity for the emergence of a governance initiative targeted at mountain areas. On the one hand, these administrations were already ‘booked.’ On the other hand, the national biodiversity strategies formulated throughout the region were seen as sufficient ground for cooperation (Interview May 6, 2012b): there simply was no perceived need for another convention. In this context, the biodiversity focal points assumed the role of gatekeepers rather than ushers vis-à-vis a regional mountain initiative. With an exchange platform in place, work programs cut out, the possibility to address mountain issues through the CBD, and no recognized urgency to commit to a new and distinct ecoregion, national actors have considered cooperation framed at the mountain scale as an additional and unnecessary workload.

Observed through the dyad of frame and scale, the two global frameworks offering justification for regional action appear to have produced opposition over the choice of scales of action, and influenced the positions of local actors accordingly. In effect, the existing biodiversity-focused global institutional framework has displaced the mountain focus from the SEE region. It is then little wonder that global and regional competition between mountain and biodiversity frame creates difficulties for national administrations.

#### *Scale and region: transcending political boundaries*

The region-building process in SEE cannot be fully understood by looking only at externally driven initiatives. Domestic coherence and the ways participating networks of actors perceive cooperation play an equally significant role. On the one hand, national actors in the region are urged to open their borders to free market demands; on the other hand they are still finding their way out of the “Westphalian trap” (Solioz & Stubbs, 2012). Many of the reinvented old/new borders between SEE countries are presently inscribed with nationalistic anxieties. Unlike in Western Europe, the processes of nation-state building in SEE have not yet reached maturity (Solioz & Stubbs, 2009). Where post-transition state building mobilizes nationalist identities,

national unity is believed to be reinforced, while subnational autonomies are undermined. The contested nature of vertical relations between different levels on the national-local jurisdictional scale is further complicated by the establishment of transnational regions following a different scalar logic.

Kosovo is an extreme example of claims for such autonomy, with its northern part experiencing both domestic and cross-border collisions. Similarly, nationalistic discourse is creating subnational isolationism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which remains segregated between the Bosnian Serb entity 'Republika Srpska' and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The historical Sandzak region, split between Serbia and Montenegro, is still looking for a way to gain a voice. The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in Serbia has difficulties to be heard in Belgrade.

These emergent sub-regional formations in SEE are frequently challenged by the establishment of cross-border entities such as territorial cooperation networks in the form of 'Euroregions' that promote the rescaling of governance institutions (Solioz & Stubbs 2009). Indeed, some observers have argued that relations between different scales are "more often than not dysfunctional" (Keim 2009), and that once established such sub-regions pose a threat of "disaggregation of national economic and political spaces" (Solioz & Stubbs 2009).

As a rule, across the SEE region countries are suffering from a severe absence of vertical integration of strategies of different levels of government. This lack of vertical institutional integration (Interview May 1, 2012) and continued fear of territorial secession/fragmentation means that national governments refrain from giving local authorities the right to independently enter cross-border agreements, which in turn further undermines regional cooperation. The same can be said for the sub-regional entities that can potentially be organized at the scale of mountain ranges and that recognize themselves as such. Even in cases deemed successful, such as the cooperation between local authorities of Serbia and Bulgaria in the Stara Planina Euroregion, the political weight of such regions at the national level is negligible. Euroregions do not have direct political power but are established to promote the common interests of local and regional authorities in the form of projects. Thus, subnational units that correspond with a mountain scale either do not have a voice, or are not heard at higher levels of government.

In addition to inadequate vertical coordination, the lack of horizontal coordination between ministries is a common feature of the countries of the region (Interview May 1, 2012). With individual ministries often acting as independent bodies rather than part of a single government, sectoral strategies are often incoherent or even in competition with each other, especially between the foreign affairs, environment, economic development, and energy sectors. For instance, when the Serbian Ministry of Environment was ready to enter a mountain agreement on the Dinaric Arc in 2011, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs quietly blocked the decision because it would have included Kosovo as an equal partner. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the Department of Environment's regional strategy for water resources protection is constantly undermined by a determined and powerful energy lobby intent on using water for electric power generation (Interview April 23, 2012). Increasingly promoted under the guise of the 'Green Economy,' small and medium-sized hydro power plants are developed throughout the region without consultation of other strategies.

The ramifications of EU membership or accession further undermine cross-sectoral coordination, which is central to the notion of sustainable mountain development. Efforts to reach compliance with EU legislation ties up national administrations, leaving little time for other ‘scale items’ on the agenda. As in the case of frame synergies between mountains and biodiversity, some of the work to be pursued in the context of regional initiatives may overlap with the work on sectoral harmonization with EU directives. However, limited national capacities mean that initiatives with distinct scales require additional (double) engagement of public agencies. Furthermore, national administrations are at times torn between the EU demand for operational setting of short-term objectives for infrastructural projects, and long-term strategic planning for nature protection projects (Interview April 6, 2012). Thus, when scales that do include an intergovernmental dimension (e.g. seas, rivers and lakes, mountains, and even new TBPA) are proposed as venues for cross-border action, they bring in another level of operation and additional workload.

The interplay of scale and region unveils that the lack of coordination and continuity, persistent competition between government sectors, and fear of sub-regional autonomy are common features in the countries of SEE. In combination, these are decisive factors explaining the inability of agencies interested in mountains to get leverage over those that are unconcerned with that scale.

To summarize our argument thus far, understanding the developments that have undermined the institutionalization of a mountain initiative has required us to consider each of the explanatory concepts—region, scale, and frame—in tandem with one of the others. But this approach is only partly satisfactory, for whichever two are considered leaves the third in the background. For instance, mobilizing region and frame enables us to highlight the multiplicity of often competing regional orders, yet such competition only becomes clear when regional orders are distinguished between jurisdictional, ecoregional, and other scales. Similarly, the dynamics of competition between different framings of scale suggests the importance of paying attention to the processes of regional construction.

### **Towards a regional mountain initiative in Southeast Europe?**

As of this writing, the prospects of a mountain convention for Southeast Europe remain highly uncertain. In the preceding section, we showed why this is the case. In particular, we demonstrated that the concepts region, scale, and frame can offer a useful analytical lens *if* the concepts’ interdependence is leveraged. Hence, the purpose of regionalization is always subject to competing frames; a region is always constructed with reference to a particular scale; and scales themselves are always framed through specific discourses and actions. None of the concepts can be considered independent of their relation with the others. In this section, we move beyond the dyadic relations to consider region, scale and frame as a triad, with a view to demonstrating how they are constituent elements of a window of opportunity. First, we retrace the weaknesses of the dyads and link them to path dependencies and critical junctures. Second, we locate the conceptual triad in historical time to characterize the missed opportunity.

*Needing the right combination...*

The negative connotations clinging to the term Balkans was a significant contributing factor to the emerging 'open regionalism' in Southeast Europe (Solioz & Stubbs 2009). Yet the proliferation of alternative regional orders and their underlying rationales—the region and frame dyad—meant that countries' loyalties were pulled in many directions at once. Not only were clusters of countries now actively solicited to join international initiatives that included some but not all SEE states, the trend toward ecoregional cooperation (such as for mountains) raised the specter of domestic cleavages between upland and lowland areas. The new fragmentation of the Balkan region also meant that some of the new regional framings split the mountain range(s).

Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, Slovenia and especially Croatia were actively framing their 'exit from the Balkans' (Lindstrom 2003) to averting looks from their southeastern neighbors until their belongingness to the Central European family of peoples was better established. As part of this strategy, the two countries willingly participated in regional initiatives such as those centering on the Pannonian Plain and the Danube River basin. Serbia, also open to the flatlands to their north, was looking for agreements in this direction for its historical belief to be an essential link between East and West, Europe and Russia, and an ally of both. Both Serbia and Croatia, dominating the Balkan Peninsula with their size and central position, see themselves fit to play a role as bridge builders between the EU and the Black Sea region. Hence, the framing of a subregion at the scale the Sava River, a main tributary to the Danube River, resulted in an agreement between countries as early as 2002, creating a split from the southern neighboring counterpart that in turn recently emerged as a subregion around the Drin River basin.

When the idea of a regional initiative for mountain areas was introduced, it was Macedonia that championed it because it sought the emulation of, and rapprochement with its northwestern neighbors. But by that time, the attention of this cluster of countries was already directed to intergovernmental cooperation in lowland areas and freshwater basins. Moreover, the idea to use mountains in the regional framing on the Balkan / SEE level was in jeopardy from the very beginning since that region was already divided both vertically by the EU association process, and horizontally by the water framework. As a result, the proposed contiguity of the mountain range scale was severely curtailed.

These examples illustrate the incompleteness of the region-frame dyad and show us that for a better understanding we are missing the third concept of scale. We realize that various regional framings are essentially based on the scale of states. However, regional fragmentation is also the result of the presence of other scale definitions – the water scale of the Sava River basin, the biodiversity scale of the Dinaric ecoregion, and the scale of the mountain range(s). Due to the simultaneous presence of different framings of collaborative action and related scale definitions the continued ambivalence among international organizations with regard to alternative regional orderings has persisted.

Mountains have been on the international agenda since the early 1990s, periodically making headlines through new mountain conventions, global scientific analysis, the International Year of Mountains, and the International Mountain Partnership. In Southeast Europe, however, efforts to promote regional cooperation on the basis of

the range(s)—the combination of frame and scale—foundered because biodiversity proved a more powerful mobilizer.

At the time when UNEP recognized the potential of global mountain mapping to legitimize and support a new scale for regional action, IUCN efforts to frame ecoregional cooperation at the scale of transboundary protected areas for peace and cooperation were well under way (Sandwith et al. 2001). The CBD's Programme of Work on Protected Areas, which requested that parties "establish and strengthen regional networks, TBPA's and collaboration between neighbouring protected areas across national boundaries" (GTPAN 2012), was agreed upon in 2004. As parties to the CBD, SEE countries had thus already invested substantial resources and administrative capacities in this frame, and have consequently committed themselves to the TBPA's scale.

The frame-scale dyad highlights the competition between mountains and biodiversity. However, this competition itself needs to be understood with reference to a particular region-building process. Even though synergies between the two frames do exist, we see that the region-building process for biodiversity does not correspond with the same space (countries) of the region-building process for mountains.

During the past two decades, the multiple and often competing scales of different SEE regions—the region-scale dyad—presented a significant challenge to international cooperation among the countries at stake. As the signifier Balkans became increasingly problematic, a series of alternative regionalization processes gradually institutionalized, vying for ownership on the part of potential constituents and in most cases overwhelming the capacity of national, let alone subnational, administrations to cope with new requirements and deadlines.

A substantial amount of institutional capacity was devoted to harmonization with EU directives including the Water Framework Directive, which is associated with the construction of freshwater basin subregions. The TBPA program of work was built through involvement of actors with biodiversity and nature protection competences. Nevertheless, the prospect of a mountain scale in the SEE region was conveyed to the same national actors already working as focal points to the previous two. Instead of becoming proxies for synergies these actors turned out to be prohibitive gatekeepers for the entry of the mountain scale. This also explains why the regional agreement at the scale of Dinaric Arc ecoregion was established rather quickly in comparison to the stalling mountain initiatives, since the agreement focused on biodiversity.

The region-scale dyad also highlights the lack of vertical coordination and horizontal integration in the Balkans institutional landscape. Consideration of the frame concept within this dyad revealed that coordination and integration shortcomings are more consequential for sustainable mountain development – it is simply a much broader framing than that of biodiversity and therefore represents a much greater challenge and obligation for national authorities.

*... at the right time*

The Big Win event in 2008 was a window of opportunity for a regional mountain initiative because the right elements were seemingly aligned. However, situating these in historical time reveals that path dependencies and earlier critical junctures had already cast a shadow over the meeting: the Big Win focused on protected areas,

suggesting a more powerful frame than sustainable mountain development; Kosovo was absent, largely because Serbia was not; Macedonia, the first to resonate mountain framing was not in the picture; and several of the DAI partners were simultaneously in the process of crafting alternative regional initiatives. How did it get to this and why does the uncertainty persist? Our conceptual framework allows us to retrace potential widows of opportunities and identify the critical junctures influencing decisions that followed.

Our conceptual dyad of region and frame shows us that a window of opportunity for a mountain agreements existed between 1999 and 2002. In this post-transition period the term South East Europe (SEE) was introduced through the 1999 Stability Pact for SEE, at the same time as IYM goals and activities was being prepared. However, the discussions for a mountain agreement in this region only started in 2004, and used the “wrong” term of the *Balkan* Mountain Convention. Furthermore, it coincided with the emergence and the split of the *West Balkan* region. In regards to the first window of opportunity, war had ruined the regional element, the earliest with Slovenia and Croatia walking away from both Balkans and SEE, and later with the powerful EU accession frame forcing the Western Balkans group. In brief, even though the mountain initiative might have offered an alternative to to the state-scale, it came late and with an unadjusted region and framing for the occasion.

Our frame-scale dyad points to a second window of opportunity between 2004 and 2007. The Balkan/SEE Mountain Convention process yielded a number of meetings and high-level events, culminating with the 2006 intergovernmental meeting where a draft of the Framework convention was adopted, and when the sixth “Environment for Europe” Conference to be held in Belgrade in 2007 was recognized as a milestone event. But by that time the CBD’s TBPA work program was already under way. Indeed, most of the countries had already ratified/accessed the CBD and were thus gearing up with biodiversity-related tasks. In 2004 Slovenia was already part of the EU and was busy ensuring compliance with the Habitats and the Birds Directives; in 2005 the Emerald Network program for the Western Balkans was started for the same purpose for non-EU countries. As for the second window of opportunity it is apparent that in spite of the efforts to reach a mountain agreement one major dependency of high influence was built in at the beginning of the transition period of the SEE countries when the lack of capacity was complemented through external competences that focused on biodiversity, and led to domination of CBD framing and TBPA scale over institutional capacities.

The region-scale dyad does not single out a particular critical juncture, but in turn calls attention to the unevenness of timing and nature of the windows of opportunity throughout the region. These were primarily driven by periods of peace, economic stability, and the EU integration process. A great disparity between countries in respect to these principal factors has made international cooperation difficult and begins to explain the compromised choices of operational scales and regions.

Retracing the gaps in the conceptual dyads with an outlook to the respective missing concepts reveals thus generates the following insights. First, the simultaneous presence of different framings of collaborative action and related scale definitions perpetuated ambivalence among international organizations with regard to alternative regional orderings. Second, the competition between mountains and biodiversity

stems from the fact that they are elements of two different region-building processes. And third, the shortcomings in institutional coordination and integration are more consequential for sustainable mountain development than for biodiversity, largely because the former has a broader framing than the latter.

Locating the windows of opportunity for our conceptual dyads explains one of the main reasons for the missed opportunities: a mountain scale could solve the regional confusion caused by state-scale based initiatives, but the timing and region-frame elements were misaligned; the biodiversity discourse was dominating institutional capacities and left little space for mountain scale-frame element to gain a foothold; due to disparities between countries sporadic and short-lasting prospects appear. Finally, looking for the window of opportunity through the lens of our conceptual triad exposes a great mismatch between the timings of elements. The first window of opportunity was opened in the period 1999-2002, and the second one in 2004-2007, and the third one was unviably sporadic. In conclusion, there never actually was a right time when all three of our essential factors could be in the right place and in the right combination.

## **Conclusion**

Even though the Big Win emitted high hopes for the negotiation of a regional mountain agreement, it also contained the seed of uncertainty. In our analysis we have identified the critical junctures and path dependencies leading to decisions that could not easily be altered later on, especially national governments' institutional commitments to biodiversity initiatives, the water framework, EU accession, and regional subdivisions. As the result of continuous regrouping and shuffling of countries, the ultimate uncertainty became apparent: once a country goes missing from an initiative there is a danger that it will not be possible to bring it back on board and continue with the region-building process. This can be recognized in the fact that Macedonia, once a champion of the Balkan Mountain Initiative, was not included in the Big Win. This in turn influenced the ambivalence between the Dinaric Arc ecoregion and the Dinaric Arc mountain range with respect to Macedonia's participation. This ambivalence was furthermore increased with respect to the inclusion of Kosovo in the latter, which was the reason Serbia could not take part in the First Dinaric Arc Conference and the regional Resolution agreement from 2011. While we agree that it is still too early to draw a final conclusion from this event, we have pointed out the paths of future development as our analysis went deeper to show the institutional challenges and conflicts.

Our purpose here is not to predict the future of the SEE mountain initiative, but merely to explain the reasons for the lingering uncertainty. Our conceptual approach is experimental and we are aware, and hope that it raise may further questions. We emphasize that our conceptual framework cannot be found anywhere else and used as such – rather it has emerged from our analysis of the empirical material, and our intention to best fit together the mass of information, and tell the story of the SEE region-building processes.



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