

Redefining Regions in Europe

Kick-off Conference of the Regional Parliaments Lab (REGIOPARL)

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Danube University Krems

Department for European Policy and the Study of Democracy

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Conference Report

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Redefining Regions in Europe Kick-off Conference of the Regional Parliaments Lab (REGIOPARL)

Krems, 30th January 2018

To whom it may concern:

This document is a brief summary of the conference "Redefining Regions in Europe" held in Krems, Austria on 23 and 24 January 2019. The conference was organised by Danube-University Krems in cooperation with Forum Morgen, the European Democracy Lab at the European School of Governance (eusg), the University of Tübingen, Jagiellonian University Kraków and the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB). The conference marked the kick-off of a 5-year research project investigating European regions that also includes interventions with regional parliamentarians in six EU Member States.

Participants included renowned European social scientists such as Prof. Claire Wallace (University of Aberdeen), Prof. Gabriele Abels (University of Tübingen) and Prof. Ulrike Guérot (Danube University Krems) who discussed the state of regions in Europe. The conference particularly focused on the principle of subsidiarity, the case of regions striving for more autonomy, and cross-border cooperation in the EU.

On the following pages, please find a brief summary of each session of the conference. The first day of the conference is also available as a video on our website: www.regioparl.com/#konferenz

In addition, we are currently preparing an edited volume on this conference and we will get back to all participants shortly with a timeline.
If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at any time via email (elisabeth.donat@donau-uni.ac.at) or phone (+43 2732 893 2765).

Yours sincerely



Dr. Elisabeth Donat

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Keynote: Small is Beautiful? On the Advantages and Pitfalls of Small-Scale Government

Prof. Claire Wallace (University of Aberdeen)



In her keynote address, Claire Wallace discussed tendencies of governance and integration and reflected on these changes in light of citizens' sense of belonging and community. Prof Wallace recapitulated the two parallel trends in spatial governance that can be observed throughout the world: Firstly, a move towards supranational governance through fora such as the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN) but also global conference formats such as the World Economic Forum. Secondly, a drive for local and regional self-governance, for example in the process of devolution in the UK.

These developments are in line with a vision once predominant in the European discourse, that of a post-nation-state order manifested through the EU. However, as stated by Claire Wallace, the global financial crisis and a subsequent revival of populist right-wing forces who stress national sovereignty and often prefer state-centred, centralised decision-making over multilateral governance and a devolution of powers from the central state to regional authorities.

Wallace then discussed some of her research on belonging and identity in Europe along two case studies, the Russian minority in Latvia and the state of the United Kingdom post-Brexit, and placed these results in relation to the themes discussed above. One observation is that the desire to belonging per se has increased throughout Europe. More than it has been the case in the past, people want to belong to something. Wallace terms this phenomenon "placism". When asked what citizens identify with most (city, region, nation-state etc.) more people pick an option than has previously been the case. However, it can be noted that a sense of belonging to region, city and Europe has increased more strongly than to other spatial places, such as the nation-state.

In conclusion, identity and belonging are becoming increasingly fluid in the European context, a process accompanied by a devolution of governance to both the local and regional level, as well as the supranational level.

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Introductory Statement

Dr. Martin Eichtinger (Minister of the Government of Lower Austria)



Martin Eichtinger referred to subsidiarity a key issue for the Austrian Federal Government, who had made it one of its priorities during the Austrian EU Council Presidency last year, but also for Lower Austrian authorities, who were at the forefront of efforts to strengthen the role of regions in the EU. Noting that many policy fields could better be dealt with at lower levels of government, Mr Eichtinger advocated a clear division of labour between levels of government in the EU.

He recalled the success of the initiative “Regions for Cohesion” initiated by Lower Austria with a view to securing cohesion funds eligibility for all regions in the next multiannual financial framework (2021-2027) and supported by almost all regions in the EU. Eichtinger also pointed to the resolution adopted by the Lower Austrian Parliament in 2017 in the context of the ongoing debate on the future of the EU. This resolution criticized the generally shrinking room to manoeuvre for lower levels of government in implementing EU law and called for an extension of the period given to national and regional parliaments for raising subsidiarity complaints (from currently 8 weeks to 12 weeks) and the introduction of a “red card” enabling a majority of national parliaments to veto a EU legislative proposal on grounds of subsidiarity.

With a view to the Brexit and mounting Euroscepticism, Eichtinger concluded by highlighting the need to better communicate the success of EU policies, which could be done best at the regional and local level.

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Round Table:

Subsidiarity – Remedy for the Democratic Deficit of the EU?

Moderator: Dr. Sarah Meyer (Danube University Krems – Regional Parliaments Lab)
 Prof. Ulrike Guérot (Danube University Krems – Regional Parliaments Lab)
 Dr. Katrin Praprotnik (Danube University Krems – Austrian Democracy Lab)
 Dr. Justus Schönlau (PES Group in the European Committee of the Regions)
 Mag. Dr. Johannes Maier (Office of the State Government of Carinthia)
 Philippe Narval, MSc (European Forum Alpbach)



The participants of the round table first explored the different meanings of “subsidiarity” and tried to explain the current revival of this concept. Originally, it was noted, subsidiarity was about the scope of the duties and responsibilities of individuals and groups in relation to the society at large and the state. In the EU context, however, subsidiarity has become a basic principle for the division of power and competences between higher and lower levels of government. Despite being enshrined in EU treaties since Maastricht, it is still unclear how binding this “deliciously vague” principle actually is and whether it should be further codified and referred to by courts in their rulings.

As long as these questions remain unsettled, subsidiarity is bound to remain a disputed concept with national and regional authorities complaining about high “regulatory density” curtailing their rights and room for discretion, on the one hand, and the EU Commission pointing to the lack of trust in member states properly implementing EU legislation, on the other hand. In any case, it was suggested to take a more constructive approach to subsidiarity, for example by enabling national parliaments to submit proposals for EU legislation to the Commission (“green card”).

Connected to the issue of subsidiarity, the participants dealt extensively with the question whether more citizen participation was needed and desired in the EU. Conflicting views were discussed: Some participants suggested to improve representative democracy by solving issues of sovereignty and legitimacy while others made a strong case for more participatory democracy at all levels of government. Thus, despite Austrian surveys showing that most citizens lack knowledge of EU politics, citizen assemblies were advocated as a proven way to involve ordinary citizens in political decision-making to supplement representative democracy.

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Panel 1:

Autonomous Regions – For Closure or for Opening?

Moderator: Bastian Kenn, BA (European Democracy Lab – Regional Parliaments Lab)

Discussant: Julien Deroin, MA (European Democracy Lab – Regional Parliaments Lab)

Prof. Andreas Rahmatian (University of Glasgow)

Prof. Marc Swyngedouw (KU Leuven)



During the first panel on Day 2, Andreas Rahmatian contributed a Scottish – and a legal – perspective on the issue of regional autonomy, arguing that there is rather a civic and Europe-friendly regionalism than an ethnic one in Scotland by referring to the parallels to a centralist feudal system which are increasingly brought to the fore by the Brexit discussion.

Marc Swyngedouw presented his research on the case of Flanders, stating that the quest for political autonomy in Flanders is closely linked to a quest for a split of social security services – so that Flemish households would transfer less income to Francophone households. However, he also showed that while there is a wide-spread quest for more power for the Flemish region, support for Flemish independence is rather low among the population.

These two characterizations of regionalism were discussed by Julien Deroin, who put forward the thesis that regional separatist claims were more closely linked to identity and culture, while regional autonomy movements are more likely to limit themselves to political claims. Referring to the title of the panel, he argued that the presented cases indicated that many regionalist tendencies – and not only those that are separatist – seem to be more about closure than opening.

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Panel 2:

Regional Parties, Populism and European Integration

Moderator and Discussant: Prof. Gabriele Abels (University of Tübingen)

Moritz Neujeffski, MSc (WZB Berlin)

Dr. Daniel Cetrà (Centre on Constitutional Change, Edinburgh)



In her opening statement to the session, Gabriele Abels pointed to a research deficit for regional parties in Europe. So far, research has focused mainly on national parties in the context of European integration and research questions mainly addressed the institutional perspective.

Daniel Cetrà discussed the cases of sub-national parties in Scotland, Catalonia, Flanders and the Basque Country in his contribution. He compared the various positions of sub-national parties on European integration and concluded that today almost all mainstream sub-national parties shared pro-European views but have different views on regional independence. Nevertheless, these positions seem to be fragile which can be observed in the persistent changes in names, actors and positions in the Catalan party system for example. Even more, the support for the EU has declined in the pro-independence camp over the last years due to perceived lack of support when striving for independence. A new „reservoir“ for Euroscepticism must therefore be expected.

In his presentation, Moritz Neujeffski focused on the interplay of regional, national and European financial distribution mechanisms and pointed to the growing amount of private investments into European funds. He emphasized that the funds did not went to the regions which have been hit the most by the crisis; instead, most of the money went back to net contributor countries and therefore cohesion funds have not been able to mitigate political radicalization if such a direct linkage can be drawn.

The discussion afterwards focused on the relationship between regional and national parties as well as among regional parties in Europe. It can be assumed that regional parties „learn“ from each other possibly copy each other's strategy for independence. Concerning the European funding strategy, the importance of transborder and crossborder cooperation was emphasized by the panelists and the audience. Funds have to leave the national „container“, since they are mainly staying in regions within national borders up to now. Taken into consideration that most European regions are in fact border regions, this obviously does not make any sense. Cross-border region projects can play an important role in combating regional nationalism as well as national regionalism, Gabriele Abels argued.

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Panel 3: Border Regions

Moderator and Discussant: Dr. Marcin Zubek (Jagiellonian University Kraków)
 Dr. Joanna Orzechowska-Wa lawska (Jagiellonian University Kraków)
 Dr. Urszula Roman-Kamphaus (Edinburgh Napier University)



Border regions are the most numerous of all European regions and often show a mixture in identities. Many of them also suffer from a certain lack of attention by the respective national governments and individual needs of border regions are often neglected. Besides this brief introduction, the panel chair Marcin Zubek also posed the question whether border regions could be a chance for the EU to reach higher outcome-legitimacy by contributing to the wellbeing of border regions.

Subsequently, Joanna Orzechowska-Wa lawska presented the case of the Basque Country and the communalities and differences of the Spanish and French part. While they show a certain extent of common cultural heritage, the extent and importance of it differs a great deal as found out through various studies. This research implies for instance that for people living in the French-Basque Country, the Basque language is a cultural heritage only and by no means relevant for communication. They also appear to majorly identify as French only, whereas symbols such as the flag etc. are a lot more common. This seems to go hand in hand with a much stronger identification as Basque and less people identifying as Spanish first.

Finally, Urszula Roman-Kamphaus gave two examples for cross-border cooperation at the Polish-German and the Polish-Slovak borders. Motivation behind such projects is the idea of border regions as laboratories of institutionalized multi-level European integration and cohesion. While the two conducted projects were challenged by the misfit of Western European approaches in an Eastern European context and a big inequality in funding towards German border regions, the outcome of the Polish-Slovak project was considered even bigger. Successes included easier conduct in the Polish-Slovak one and bigger innovation in terms of pioneer approaches in the Polish-German one. According to these empirical findings, cross-border projects are promising initiatives despite the differences in governance, cultural, legal and socio-economic backgrounds and funding on both sides of each borders.

