THE SOUTHERN UPPER RHINE AS A EUROREGION? CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF INTRA AREA INTEGRATION

Sigrid LIPOTT

University of Trieste, Department of Political and Social Sciences,
Piazzale Europa 1, 34100 Trieste, Italy. e-mail: sigridlipott@hotmail.com

Abstract: The Southern Upper Rhine border region, also known as Regio Trirhena, is often considered in the scholarly literature as a model of transborder Euregio. Based on extensive analysis of existing literature, of data and documents available within the existing legal-institutional frameworks and on the utilisation of a number of diverse theoretic constructs, the aim of this paper is to reflect on whether the Southern Upper Rhine borderland can be qualified as a Euroregion by addressing its context, dimensions and underpinnings of area integration. First, it provides a brief background on the evolution of cross-border cooperation in the region. Second, it offers a theoretical framework for a conceptual definition of Euroregion. Third, it analyses elements of continuity and discontinuity in the Southern Upper Rhine Valley including the physical, functional and political dimension. It concludes that the degree of intra area integration does not depend only on the level of institutionalization of cross-border cooperation and on the number of cross-border projects and cross-border organizations but on different sets of symmetries/asymmetries.

Key words: cross-border cooperation, Euroregion, France, Germany, governance, Switzerland

*   *   *   *   *   *

SUMMARY

Transfrontier cooperation is already a well established phenomenon in international relations. Its modern origins can be traced back to the aftermath of World War II. Characterized first by elements of spontaneity and flexibility, transfrontier cooperation has taken over the years a series of more institutionalized forms, leading to the creation of Euroregions, which could be called a 'region of regions' and are in principle engaged in a comprehensive approach to cross-border cooperation, i.e. they not only deal with problems that are similar but they also create common structures and extend their cooperation to other fields which are deemed as significant by the civil society. The best – known example of this type of cross-border cooperation is the Regio established on the three borders between Switzerland, France and Germany. The originality of Regio Trirhena resides in the fact that, due to the long experience it has gained in cross-border cooperation, it may be seen as a paradigmatic case for the development of euroregional bodies and cross-border dynamics at different levels.

Based on extensive analysis of existing literature, of data and documents available within the three legal-institutional frameworks and on the utilisation of a number of diverse theoretic constructs, the aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework regarding cross-border cooperation in the Southern Upper Rhine Valley region and to discuss whether the region could be qualified as a Euroregion. The concept of Euroregion will be analysed through different perspectives; in particular, the importance of terminology will be stressed by underlying the difference between the different conceptions of the term. We shall then see how the term applies to the case study. It will be shown that intra area integration does not depend only on the level of institutionalization of cross-border cooperation and on the number of cross-border projects and cross-border organizations but on different sets of asymmetries.

PATTERNS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN THE SOUTHERN UPPER RHINE REGION

Cross-border cooperation can be defined as a relational strategy aiming at developing synergies and solve problems which are common to two or more areas along the state border. Cross-border cooperation has three main goals: generating participation, generating transparency and elaborating strategies (ISIG, 2010). Besides, cross-border regions can be qualified as political laboratories on the micro level and as laboratories for international institution building (Hall, 2008; Beck, 2009). According to Perkmann (2003), a cross border region is a bounded territorial unit composed of the territories of authorities participating in cross-border cooperation initiatives.

Cross-border cooperation in the Southern Upper Rhine region coincides with the perimeter of the old Regio Trirhena, situated on the Southern end of the Upper Rhine Rift Valley and stretching over part of three countries - Germany's Southern Baden, France's Upper Alsace and five cantons of Northwest Switzerland.

Figure 1. Spatial perimeter of the Southern Rhine valley cross-border region
(Source: http://www.synergyofcontadiction.wordpress.org)

It is particularly difficult to define when cross-border cooperation started in the Upper Rhine region where contacts and relations between the different sub- regions never really stopped throughout history (Duvinage, 1996). However, it is commonly accepted that transborder cooperation in the area has been explicitly developing since the early 1960s and, since then, a large number of institutions and cross-border bodies have been created at the institutional level as well as at the political level. Informal contacts across the national borders were established already in the 1950s by business actors and local authorities, in order to make everyday life easier and to solve those problems that the local authorities were not able to cope with. (Ferrrara, 2002, 24). The pioneer phase of cross-border cooperation was marked by the creation of the Swiss association Regio Basiliensis by private and para-political actors in 1963, following the example of the Euregio on the German-Dutch border. Functional scopes, such as enhancing development and growth within a European and supranational context and making the total area a central one in spite of its peripheral location with respect to the national systems (Maurer-Feder, 2001, 192) were the priorities during that phase. Nevertheless, the wish to heal the scars of history and to safeguard peace and create a common regional identity for the Regio can be also mentioned among the driving forces (Wassenberg, 2010a, 115).

On the official side, an institutional cooperation was developed by the creation of similar associations in the French and German territories: the Regio of the Upper Rhine in 1965 and the Freiburger Regio-Gesellschaft in 1985, which together formed one single Regio. Transborder cooperation was then further institutionalised through tri-national congresses and conferences; in 1975 the Bonn Treaties made the relations between the three states official, which led to the creation of official bodies of transborder cooperation with a legitimisation at the national level; in 1976 an international German-French-Swiss intergovernmental commission, which replaced the Tripartite Conference, was established. Besides, cooperation was gradually extended outside the traditional perimeter, including the North Alsace and the Karlsruhe region (also called Upper Rhine Euregio) and thus giving birth to a polycentric system of cross-border cooperation.

In 1980 an approach based on the development of functional policies was pursued, with the definition of six priority axes developed within separated work groups and regarding the following domains: economy and transports, environment, energetic policy, culture, media and territorial planning. Over the years, the number of cross-border institutions and societies has grown, their individual territorial range differing greatly (Sandtner, Eder, 2002b, 151). Biannual conferences with representatives from all three border nations have been regularly organized since 1988. In parallel, cross-border cooperation has deepened at the informal level too, among firms, business organization, local actors, leading to grassroots demands for further cross-border interaction.

The phase of institutionalization was completed at the beginning of the 1980s, when the Upper Rhine region complied with a number of conditions that seem to foster the creation of a euroregion: a delimited perimeter, identified institutional actors and an established operative framework (Wassenberg, 2007, 154). The process gained momentum when the policy of decentralization was introduced in France in 1982, allowing French regions to deal directly with Swiss cantons and German Länder as counterparts (Wassenberg, 2007, 335). This way, cross-border cooperation in the area became what could be defined as

an association between frontier regions. The institutional level of cooperation was reinforced and the Conference of the Upper Rhine was established in 1991 with the aim of fostering institutional relations at the regional level.

During the 1990s, the framework for cross-border cooperation in the area was completed thanks to two processes: partial rationalization of existing structures; Europeanization of objectives. In 1995 the Council of the Regio Trirhena was founded with the aim of coordinating transborder cooperation in one single body and of representing the (cross- border) regional interest and in 1997 the old Regio Basiliensis was included in it. The Council functions as a network of cities, communities, regional administrative bodies and associations.

During the 1990s, finally, European objectives also appeared on the agenda when the Community Initiative Interreg was introduced and cross-border cooperation was linked with European integration. Whilst the first programming period was directed to the PAMINA area (the Northern part of the Upper Rhine region), the Regio Trirhena was later integrated into the Interreg programme South-Centre Upper Rhine (Wassenberg, 2010b). During the 1990s the Regio became what calls an actual regional association of cooperation (Balme, 1996, 132).

Furthermore, the new goal was that of bringing the Regio concept to the everyday citizen. In 1996, the Karlsruhe Treaty formally authorised transborder communities to carry out common projects. At the local level a Conference of the mayors of the Upper Rhine was established in 1990 (Maurer-Feder, 2001, 195) which led to the creation of numerous micro-scale projects involving such fields as education, bilingualism, tourism, transports and culture and carried out firstly at a bi-national level and later extended to the tri- national region. The main strategic project for cross-border cooperation at the micro level was the creation of two information centres for the inhabitants.

The early 2000s saw the emergence of sub- national and supra-national dynamics in the framework of cross-border cooperation in the Southern Upper Rhine Valley and, at the same time, the deepening and integration of various forms of collaboration. First of all, the Bonn Treaties were revised, which marked the beginning of a new phase of cooperation characterized, in principle, by a comprehensive approach and by the involvement of all kinds of local and regional actors, including citizens; as a matter of fact, several initiatives in favour of citizens have been put in place during the 2000s and numerous tripartite congresses have been entirely dedicated to the issue of linking cross – border cooperation projects with a more local dimension centred on the participation of citizens. However, this did not lead to a further rationalization of existing practices, as projects of contiguous cooperation started to be realized and financed both within and outside the Interreg framework (Wassenberg, 2012, 89).

Likewise, in 2003 a new concept was introduced for the whole Upper Rhine region: that of eurodistrict (Wassenberg, 2010a, 111). The eurodistrict is a space of local cooperation taking place around the main urban agglomerations with the objective of creating basins of common lives (Frey, 2005, 450). Since then, four eurodistricts have been created, two of which are situated within the Regio Trirhena: the trinational district of Basle and the eurodistrict Mulhouse-Colmar- Freiburg. RegioTrirhena, together with the Trinational Agglomeration Basel merged into the Trinational Eurodistrict Basel in 2007. In 2004, the tripartite congress introduced the concept of Metropolitan Region, a project which aims mainly at fostering the economic development and at deepening joint territorial planning.

TOWARDS A EUROREGION?

According to the Association for European Border Regions (AEBR) there are four principles which define successful cross-border cooperation: partnership and subsidiarity; the existence of a common strategy; joint structures; independent sources of financing (Gabbe, 2004, 30).

Regio Trirhena was built upon a bottom up approach, founded on mutual trust and researches win-win situation and on different scales of cooperation; nevertheless, it does not dispose itself of all the necessary criteria. Though, the new concept of Metropolitan Region, with the new principles adopted, seems to match the above mentioned requirements, so that the medium-scale level, i.e. the Regio, disposes of a common plan and of joint structures and scale economies (Frey, 2011, 178).

The institutional framework of cross-border cooperation in the Upper Rhine region complies also with the criteria laid down by the Council of Europe for evaluating the existence of an actual Euroregion, i.e.: joint decision-making procedures; joint determined objectives; the involvement of actors from the local, regional and national level; governance structures.

Among the cooperation network initiatives for joint development and European integration, the term Euroregion identifies a form of cross-border cooperation which has been more and more often adopted. Different sources list Regio Trirhena among established euroregions (Proto, 2008; Sandtner, Eder 2002a; Gaunard, 2000; Del Bianco, 2008). However, it is necessary to define what a euroregion actually consists of and, accordingly, to evaluate whether the concept can be applied to the analysed case of transboundary regionalization.

With respect to the general term cross-border cooperation, the Euroregion represents a phase of greater integration between border regions belonging to contiguous states. The Euroregion is made operational in an agency institutionally aiming at creating favourable conditions for cross-border co-operation legitimizing operators and associations with determined goals, providing expert support and services to gain from the opportunities created by EU programmes, and, finally, elaborating strategies orienting civil society to create and/or support cross-border co-operation (Del Bianco, 2006).

The Upper Rhine region, and in particular Regio Trirhena, in spite of the misleading name Regio (Euregio or Regio has usually been taken as a Euroregion benchmark) and its long tradition of cooperation, has never been officially addressed to as a Euroregion. It is possible to state that, under some profiles, it can be considered a Euroregion, though it cannot be called as such (Wassenberg, 2010b; Reitel, 2010).

One explanation might be sought in the fact that, in concrete, there is no univocal or commonly agreed definition for Euroregion, but several ones, that widen or narrow the meaning on a case-by-case basis (Proto, 2008, 5). Nevertheless, several scholars and institutions have tried to define or classify euroregional bodies.

A taxonomy of Euroregions can be found in Proto (2008, 24) who identifies three different typologies of Euroregions according to the fundamental objectives that led to their creation: the model of euregio/regio, the working communities (which are not Euroregions in strict sense), and the euroregional model emerged along the former Iron Curtain. The first model is represented by the case of cross-border cooperation between Germany, Switzerland and France (and between Germany and the Low Countries) and, by contrast with the other two, is

characterised by a strong political mobilization that, since the beginnings, involved both the policy-makers and the social base: the momentum is bottom-up, or mixed bottom-up and top-down, the structures manage the territorial policies at various levels and they are less related to individual project activities funded by the European Community).

The Association of European Border Regions has also set the some criteria for the identification of Euroregions: (1) an association of local and regional authorities on either side of the national border, sometimes with a parliamentary assembly; (2) a transfrontier association with a permanent secretariat and a technical and administrative team with own resources; (3) of private law nature, based on non-profit-making associations or foundations on either side of the border in accordance with the respective national law in force; (4) of public law nature, based on inter-state agreements, dealing among other things, with the participation of territorial authorities. The Euroregion may therefore take on a configuration that varies over time according to the objectives being pursued by cross-border co-operation players, according to legal consideration and according to the public and/or private actors belonging to it, as confirmed by Gasparini (2005). This definition can be applied to different types of associations including Regios, though they it appears rather vague and, while it has a juridical relevance, it does not appear very useful at the practical level. Moreover, in the Upper Rhine space, several association of both public and private nature coexist.

Different definitions and models have been proposed by scholars especially during the 1990s and 2000s. Strassoldo (2005:9) defines the Euroregion as an instance of collaboration among local authorities residing in contiguous areas but belonging to different states. According to Balme (1996, 122), the Euroregion can be defined as a regional association of transborder cooperation. Olivesi (1996, 132) defines the Euroregion as a transfrontier space of cooperation whose aim is to enhance European integration in broad sense. Deutsch (quoted in Dupeyron et al., 1999) sees the Euroregion as a group of political units which are more strictly connected to each other than to any other unit, which leads to the creation of a new, autonomous political unit.

Another definition is supplied by Alberto Gasparini (2003), who considers Euroregions as 'the drive of cross-border areas towards institutional autonomy, fostering cooperation and development in those areas otherwise doomed to be marginal', resulting in an association which has the function of coordinating the activities carried out in the field of transborder cooperation.

In this sense, the Euroregion is considered as the most advanced form of institutionalization of cross-border co-operation given the following four characteristics: (i) it deals on an institutional level with cross-border co-operation involving areas relatively contiguous with borders; (ii) it tends to favour complete cross-border co-operation, comprising support for local players in the use of European and local funds, the creation of reciprocal knowledge and the promotion of the formation, activation and transformation of actions and organisation for cross- -border co-operation; its work extends to economic, social, cultural, educational, service provided and institutional activity – all involving trans-national players (Gasparini, 2005). Nevertheless, it is also commonly argued that Euroregions do not represent a new local or regional institutional-administrative level, but rather an exchange and governance point for already existing public and private institutions (Gasparini, 2003; Perkmann, 2003).

If the transborder region Regio Trirhena complies with the neutral definition given by Strassoldo, and with the general definition given by Balme, based basically on a joint development of a spatial planning in order to heal the scars of history, the other models bring forward several problems. Deutsch's definition certainly cannot be applied to the model of cross-border cooperation in the Upper Rhine region, as it implies the idea of a 'Europe of regions'. If the Swiss and German partners could envisage a sort of political autonomy of the euroregional structure, for the French ones it is simply not conceivable and incompatible with the very structure of a unitary and indivisible state.

The model proposed by Olivesi is even more complex and can be only partially applied to transborder cooperation in the analysed area. Switzerland, as a non- member of the EU, is only partly associated to the process of European construction. The country is generally considered to be as a passive member of the EU (Nomes, 2008). In a way, however, the Regio Trirhena can be considered as a structure of mediation between the local communities of belonging, becoming an instrument to foster and develop the feeling of a European belonging (Ferrara, 2000, 25); in turn, for the EU the Regio can be considered as test region where it can see its possible evolution and model lab for cross – border integration at the EU internal and external frontiers.

On the one hand, since 1972, it has signed more than 120 bilateral agreements with the EU, which allow the country to have a privileged access to the European market and to take part in numerous European programs which are in principle reserved only to the member states. In addition, Switzerland is responsible for a sort of 'autonomous alignment': it reproduces several European norms and laws even without having an obligation to do so.

On the other hand, it has to be argued that the process of European construction surpasses the mere economic aspect. If negative integration aims at abolishing different types of barriers between the member states, positive integration aims at establishing a system of regulation within the supranational actor and involves also EU external borders. Switzerland is therefore associated to the process of European construction in the sense of contributing to the abolition of some border functions (Reitel, 2010, 295). In spite of the fact of being external borders, Swiss frontiers with Germany and France can be considered as largely open: not only because Switzerland belongs to Schengen area but also because the intra –area borders have undergone a process of dematerialisation and defunctionalisation (Reitel, 2010, 297).

CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES

And yet, whereas EU border no longer impose any restraints, the Swiss border is still a confining factor in many respects and still constitutes an obstacle to full intra-area integration, in spite of the liberalisation process brought forward by the practice of bilateral treaties between Switzerland and the EU and Switzerland and single EU member states.

Another reason why Regio Trirhena could not be called a proper Euroregion can be sought in the fact that regional integration, although quite advanced, is not complete. Different studies conducted during the 2000s (Reitel, 2010; Sandtner, Eder, 2002a and 2002b) show that the growth of cross-border relations has not reduced the difference between the regional identities living on either side of the border. Cross-border relations have created a system of interdependency which has been structured by the border itself; nevertheless, in spite of numerous factors of continuity, important discontinuities persist.

It can be argued that the region presents several elements in favour of continuity: from a geographical standpoint, Regio Trirhena belongs to a coherent natural space; although it constitutes a trinational region, it belongs to great extent to a common cultural and historical Germanic space (Dollinger, Oberlé, 1985). Nevertheless, the region is situated at the core of a zone of interference of influence sphere between different European states (Sandtner, Eder, 2002b), leading to a delicate balance of power in the transborder region. The (relative) linguistic unity is challenged by a political, but to some extent also cultural, fragmentation which stems from the scars of history: the territories belonging to the classical core of the Regio have changed nationality several times, alternating their belonging to France and Germany: for example, whereas the Basle and Bade regions have always remained Germanic, Southern Alsace, was incorporated into a centralised France during the XVII century, except for the Mulhouse republic which was allied to Swiss Confederation.

In order to verify the hypothesis of regional integration, we derive three main dimensions from the model proposed by Van Houtum (2007), who has defined three approaches in order to determine the intensity of transfrontier relations: functional, cultural and political. On this basis, it can be argued that elements of discontinuity in the Southern Upper Rhine cross -border region include the physical (geographical), the functional and social (flows and networks), the cultural (linguistic issues) and the political dimension (forms of government).

From a geographic standpoint, the Rhine constitutes a circulation axis which spatially organizes the region in an unbalanced, the city of Basle being the main circulation 'knot' in the space of Regio Trirhena. Functional relations appear to be asymmetric too: transfrontier flows, constituted to great extent by commuters, are oriented primarily towards Switzerland, and, secondarily, towards Germany. By contrast, residential migrations are oriented towards Alsace. These phenomena can be easily explained one the one hand with the differences in the level of salaries (highest on the Swiss side) and on the other hand in the costs of living (lowest on the French side).

Economic cross-border relations, which are usually established outside the framework of institutional cooperation, have been the motor of cross-border regional development, and have been conducted especially by means of investments and creation of branches on the other side of the border. Switzerland appears to be the motor of this kind of transborder relations, with enormous capitals directed to the Alsace industry. Micro - scale integration, that means contiguous or local cooperation among inhabitants of the border territories, has also had a great impact on the development of intra -area integration. Among the most important activities it is possible to recall commuting relations, commercial habits and real estate markets (Sandtner, Eder, 2002a). Figure 2 gives an outline on the nature and intensity of transborder flows.
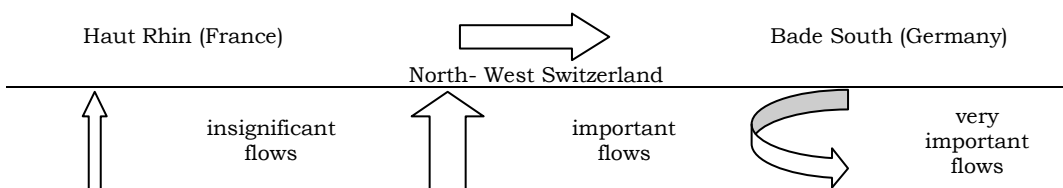
Figure 2. Asymmetrical transborder flows in Regio Trirhena
(Source: figure adapted from table contained in Sandtner, Eder (2002) 'Une identité régionale transfrontalière: la regio Trirhena dans la prise de conscience de la population', in Révue géographique de l'est, vol. 42, 1-2)

In spite of the large number of transborder projects which have been constantly developed (above all in the field of environmental protection and transports), both the Regio Trirhena and the macro Upper Rhine region dispose neither of a common representation nor of autonomous financial means. Therefore, political bodies do not actually act as such, but have limited competences which are in most of cases reduced to coordination, which also results to be stunted due to the large number of existing institutions.

If intra-area integration has undoubtedly enhanced transborder relations and cross-border crossings, the latter reveal the existence of the above mentioned asymmetries existing in the Upper Rhine region. Even though it is not directly relevant to the classification of the Upper Rhine region as a Euroregion, it is worth mentioning that discontinuities exist also as regards transfrontier networks (border crossings). Although several improvements have been carried out during the last ten years, some shortcomings still exist in circulation axes connecting Alsace to Baden Württemberg (some *cul de sac* can be found for example from Colmar to Breisach and from Mulhouse to Müllheim). Connections are better between Switzerland and Germany with more than 145 trains per day, whereas connections between Switzerland and France are weaker (ranging from 46 to 96 trains per day) (Reitel, Moine, 2005). The reasons for these asymmetries cannot be sought only in the geomorphology of the territory but also in a disagreement between different kinds of policies inspired by different models of urbanisation: a model of urbanisation with a structured offer of collective transports privileging certain axes but taking into consideration also secondary knots, and a model aiming at linking the main knots with high speed.

At the political level, it can be argued that the main geographical organizations emerging in the region are cross-border urban regions centred on their metropolises. From a comparative analysis of projects elaborated within the framework of Interreg programme, in the Upper Rhine space and in the Transjura space, it appears that the number of cross-border projects is much higher in the former than in the latter; however, the argument of a regional polarised space finds a confirmation in the consideration that, in the Upper Rhine region, projects of contiguous cooperation, i.e. aiming at strictly linking territories close to the border (especially border towns, which are situated not further than 25 km from the political border), constitute a rare occurrence (Reitel, Moine, 2005): they are rather linked with the size and population of agglomerations; accordingly, the city of Basle, which has always been the main promoter of cross-border cooperation initiatives, since the establishment of Regio Basiliensis, still appears to be situated at the political core of the transborder region. This is also confirmed by the establishment of the 'Trinational Agglomeration of Basle', (ATB), which took the name of 'Trinational Eurodistrict of Basle' in 2007.

Already during the late 1990s, it became clear that the Euroregion, intended as an association between frontier regions, has been replaced by the concept of regional association of cooperation (Wassenberg, 2010b, 449). This appears to be strictly linked with the process of European construction, since the transborder instance does not aim at creating an actual political unity by replacing the national states.

The actors involved in the process of cross-border cooperation in the region have recently adopted the concept of Metropolitan Region, which responds more to the definition of Euroregion given by Balme. The concept is obviously more

neutral and refers more to the establishment of spatial planning structure than to the prospect of a political unity: it aims at rendering the cross-border region competitive by increasing its ties and its economic potential. Furthermore, the Metropolitan Region benefits from European support, whereas the concept of Euroregion is not officially recognised by EU leaders. As a matter of fact, two main cross-border bodies benefit from European legitimisation: the EGTC and the Metropolitan Region.

The concept of Metropolitan Region was introduced at the highest political level of the EU within the framework of economic strategy which was defined at the Lisbon European Council in 2003. It is strictly connected with the concept of cluster economic development, which has always been the main goal of Regio Basiliensis first and Regio Trirhena later.

The 'European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation' (EGTC) is a new juridical tool for transborder cooperation which, following Regulation 1082/2006, has enabled regional and local authorities from different EU countries to set up co-operation groupings as legal entities for projects of cross-border and trans-European significance. This Regulation represents an important progress towards the institutionalization of territorial trans-border governance structures. The EGTC is understood as an example of multi-level governance since it has the capacity to create a network of transnational jurisdictions involving regional government leaders, national government leaders, associations of local authorities, regional council representatives and private bodies which can work on similar competencies and resources. The participation of members from non-EU countries is not excluded, provided that the law of such countries or the agreements between them and the Member States allow such participation. One of chief characteristics of Regio Basiliensis, and later of Regio Trirhena, is that it relies on and promotes public- private partnership (PPP); thus the EGTC, or a PPP – based juridical tool, would safeguard the best way the interests of entities and people taking part in transfrontier collaboration at the cross-border local/regional level. Up to date, prospects for the establishment of an EGTC between France, Germany and Switzerland, however, have not been discussed yet and no juridical tool has been envisaged for its construction.

The presence in the area of so many organs of cooperation (see *supra*) sometimes leads to unclear intersecting spheres of competences. The Regio Trirhena lays under the sphere of influence of the broader Upper Rhine area, that means that local and regional authorities, in charge of promoting cross-border activities under the umbrella of Regio Trirhena, are assembled in the macro-regional organ of the Intergovernmental Commission and of the Trinational Metropolitan region. Due to their large territorial scope and working methods, it can be argued that both represent a sort of supra-national bodies. In principle, the Trinational Metropolitan Region develops strategic orientations and coordinates both vertically and horizontally through the institutionalization of four sectorial working groups. However, in practice, it lacks executive powers. The political pillar, according to the Upper Rhine Council held in 2008, is constituted by the Upper Rhine Conference and by the Upper Rhine Council itself (Frey, 2010, 341), which, from an organizational standpoint, cover the whole territory and whose members are present at the various levels (governments, regions, cities, eurodistricts,...). Nevertheless, they do not constitute a political authority, as the intergovernmental level, through the presence of national authorities, is always present in decision-making.

Within the space of Regio Trirhena it is possible to identify not only one but different 'semic systems' which can be divided into three dyads (Reitel, 2010, 305). The first dyad, constituted by Switzerland and Germany, which share a similar form of political system (federal) as well as linguistic continuity, reveals a relative continuity. The second dyad includes Germany and France, which share the belonging to the EU, as well as traditionally strong economic ties due to the presence of a 'cold' frontier (*frontier apaisée*). The last dyad, constituted by France and Switzerland, shows the greatest discontinuity due to the very different political systems (unitary/federal), to the presence of a EU frontier, and, to some extent, to the linguistic cleavage (see *infra*).

TRINATIONAL INTEGRATED BORDERLAND: DEVELOPMENT IN REGIONAL CROSS-BORDER INTEGRATION

In general, five levels of institutionalization of transborder relations can be detected: 1) information; 2) consultation; 3) coordination; 4) cooperation; 5) integration (Frey, 2012, 72; ISIG, 2010). If coordination corresponds to what Schultz (2003, 12-13) defines cooperation in single projects and cooperation includes also the elaboration of a common 'mission' and definition of common goals in most of areas with regular meetings between the municipalities or sub- state entities, only the level of integration provides the institutionalization of an actual transborder body, be it a Euroregion or another type of association based on public of private law. Integration includes the elaboration of a common legal framework, the construction of independent institutions or joint agencies and own financial means.

It can be stated that, in spite of not being officially qualified as an Euroregion, the Regio Trirhena, – at least in comparative perspective with most of other established Euroregions – can be considered as a 'trinational integrated borderland' corresponding to the definition of integrated borderland given by Martinez (1994), i.e. an area where: stability is strong and permanent; economies of both countries are functionally merged; there is unrestricted movement of people and goods across the border; the borderlands perceive themselves as members of one social system. Nevertheless, these requirements are can be considered as the description of an ideal model which is not completely fulfilled in the practice. Therefore some clarifications are necessary.

Nobody would question that the Franco-Swiss-German border represents a 'cold frontier', at least since the mid '60s with the signature of the Elyseum Treaty in 1963 by France and Germany, and which was celebrated, as a symbol of reconciliation for the whole transborder area, also in Berne on the occasion of its 50th years. The strategy of foreign policy adopted by the Confederation in 2012 sees the relationship with its French and German neighbours as a priority of action (Burkhalter, 2013).

From an economic point of view, Switzerland is the most integrated non –EU member in the common market. Moreover, from a macroregional point of view, the Upper Rhine macro region is progressively evolving towards a common economic space. The structure of economic sectors is broadly complementary between the sub- regions, above all in the textile, chemical, agrochemical and pharmaceutical fields. Southern Alsace, Southern Bade and Northwest Switzerland constitute the biggest and most competitive cluster in the development of life sciences in Europe and one of the biggest in the world (BAK Basel Economics, 2006). Thanks to the joint initiative of BioValley, started in 1996, the trinational region has created a common image for the field of biotechnologies.

Unrestricted movement across the border is also a fact: in the Regio area roughly 33,000 commuters from France and 30,000 from Germany cross the border in direction of Switzerland (Frey, 2012, 65). The commuter movement from Southern Alsace towards Southern Baden is also significant, with almost 24,000 commuters per day. It can be said that the population of Trirhena benefits from the economic differences between the three nations in the region.

Whilst the first three requisites given by Martinez appear to be satisfied, the last one poses some critical reflexions. Moreover, a fifth criterion could be added to the definition: the balance of powers between the partners and the existence of an integrated political model.

Regio Trirhena does not seem to constitute a cross-border territorial unity if we take into consideration the fourth and fifth criteria for the evaluation of an integrated borderland due to the persistence of different kinds of asymmetries between the partners. One issue concerns the relationship between Switzerland and the Franco-German axis: the former, in spite of being and remaining the main promoter of Regio Trirhena, has a marginal within the EU system, with the consequence of scarce margins for extensively influencing EU cross- policies and regulations. The non-membership to the EU implies also differing competences at the local-regional level and differing applicable standard to a number of situation, ranging from environmental protection to antitrust regulations, etc....

Another aspect regards the reflexes of the relationship between a federal (Switzerland and Germany) and unitary model (France) upon the patterns of management of the cross-border region. Shortcomings still exist as far as regards the aims and expectation of the partners. Furthermore, while in Germany and in Switzerland the central states have never thwarted the development of cross-border contacts, France has always exerted, notwithstanding the formal declarations, a tight political, administrative and above all financial control on the activities of cross-border co-operation of its decentralised entities (Ferrara, 2003). As a result, it is clear the reason why there is a certain lack of balance between the partners of the area.

One other factor concerns the issue of regional identity. Empirical researches carried out in Regio Trirhena and regarding the identification of its inhabitants with different levels of space concepts (EU, national, regional, cross – border) reveal that, even though the Regio is well known by the majority of the population, transborder identity plays only a secondary with respect to the national, European and regional level (Sandtner, Eder, 2002a and 2002b). With one significant exception: whereas most of inhabitants of Southern Alsace and Southern Bade seem to consider the cross – border region in competition with the respective local part of each national side, the Swiss identify themselves more with the Regio than with North- East Switzerland. However, in general, the domination of the national states largely influences not only policies carried out in the Regio but also the issue of identity (in Switzerland and France almost 40 per cent of interviewees identify themselves primarily with their own country).

Bilingualism certainly constitutes the principal means in order to create one social system. Although bilingualism is quite spread in the territory of the Regio, it is worth noting that a discontinuity exist to this regard (Wassenberg 2001: 300): whilst in Upper Alsace approximately two thirds of the inhabitants can speak the language of the neighbour, as a result of its history and school system, in Southern Baden less than 35 per cent claim to have a good command of French (Sandtner, 2002, 147). According to Grossman (1999, 109),

transborder cooperation in the linguistic field is unilateral; nevertheless, the system of bilingual teaching in Alsace from the primary school has served as a basis for the development of a common linguistic policy as a tool for enhanced transborder cooperation. The establishment of a 'bilingual transborder zone' (Schäfer, 1996, 106) in the Upper Rhine region has been at the heart of several projects carried out within the last three Interreg programming periods, which led to the creation of a confederation of educational institutes.

The Upper Rhine region has proved a good example for testing a cross - border euroregional theory. This does not mean, however, that it is necessarily a model for successful cross-border cooperation. The case of the Upper Rhine illustrates that the evolution in cross-border cooperation structures and activities does not necessarily lead to greater clarity in the understanding of cross-border dynamics. In a multi – level approach, new forms of cooperation and efforts to insert them into a system of cross-border governance at several levels increases the complexity of border regions (Wassenberg, 2011b, 350) and reduce their margins for deeper intra – area integration.

CONCLUSIONS: THE TRIRHENA 'MODEL'

To conclude, it can be argued that, in spite of not being officially called Euroregion, the Regio Trirhena corresponds to several criteria generally laid down both by institutions and by scholars for its definition.

The originality of the Regio Trirhena, with its long-term experience in cross-border interrelations, resides in the fact that it has shown, long before the principle of subsidiarity was introduced by the EU documents, that cross-border cooperation should take place at a low level and may serve as an example for other border zones in Europe, facilitating the realisation of projects by reducing the number of involved decision - making powers (Sandtner, Eder, 2002b, 157).

Nevertheless, its political élite has chosen a different kind of legitimization for its cross-border projects, i.e. that of a macro Metropolitan Region. The area can be rather defined as a 'trinational integrated borderland', even though significant discontinuities persist between the partners and the three social systems. Discontinuities and asymmetries continue to persist at the functional, economic, political and social level. It appears that cross-border co-operation in the area, notwithstanding the strong aspiration of local politics to project itself in a broader and more proactive context external to national administrative frameworks, maintains a predominant functional-pragmatic nature, based on small-scale projects.

The example of cross-border cooperation in the Southern Upper Rhine show that political borders still matter and that, in the effort to overcome them, asymmetries between partners can lead to the creation of a plurality of boards. The strategy-oriented approach, introduced in principle with the concept of Metropolitan region, does not necessarily lead to greater clarity in the process towards the establishment of a Euroregion.

The Southern Upper Rhine Valley could be certainly be qualified as a regional association of cooperation at multiple levels; nevertheless, if we take into account Deutsch´s definition of Euroregion, we must conclude that the creation of the Trinational Metropolitan Region does not entail for the Southern Upper Rhine Valley the establishment of a new political cluster where units are – at the functional, political and social level, more connected to each other.

REFERENCES

BALME, R., (1996), *Les politiques du néorégionalisme- action collective régionale et globalisation*, Paris: Economica;

BECK, J. et al., (2009), *The trinational Metropolitan Region Upper Rhine, a laboratory for territorial cohesion in Europe*, available at http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:NEY2oT3KbzQJ:www.regbas.ch/files/downloads/Presentation_upper_rhine_25_9_09.pdf+beck+trinational+metropolitan+region+upper+rhine&cd=2&hl=fr&ct=clnk&gl=ch. (accessed 10/05/2013);

BURKHALTER, D., (2013), Speech on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the signature of the Eliseum treaty, Bern 22/01/2013;

DEL BIANCO, D., (2006), *Cross-border cooperation as a tool for transnational integration and conflict resolution: the Upper Adriatic Euroregional experiences*, in Narodna umjetnost, Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research, 43, I;

DEL BIANCO, D., (2008), *Welfare transfrontaliero per la vita quotidiana. Modello di sviluppo locale per le regioni di confine. Il caso dell'area transfrontaliera italo-slovena*, PhD thesis, Gorizia;

DOLLINGER, P., OBERLE, R., (1985) *L'histoire de l'Alsace - De la préhistoire à nos jours*, Colmar: SAEP;

DUPEYRON, et al., (1999), *Les eurorégions*, in Revue de la coopération transfrontalière, n.15.

DUVINAGE, F., (1996) *The cross-border cooperation between Switzerland, France and Germany, European Regional Science Association*, available at http://www.sre.wu.ac.at (accessed 10/11/2013);

FERRARA, W., (2000), *The workings of the Euro-region: the Regio Basiliensis and cross-border cooperation in the Upper Rhine region*, Isig magazine, n. 1/2000;

FREY, M., (2010), *Les concepts d'une gouvernance régionale transfrontalière: l'exemple de la région trinationale du Rhin Supérieur*, in Vivre et penser la coopération transfrontalière: les régions transfrontalières françaises, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag;

FREY, R., (2012), *Erfolge und Probleme der grenzüberschreitende Kooperation: das Beispiel der Basler Dreiländerregion*, in Kreis G. (eds.) Grenzüberschreitende Mikrointegration del Basler Dreiländerraum gestern-heute-morgen, Basle: Europa Institut of the University of Basle;

GABBE, J., (2004), *The Euroregion as a place for transfrontier cooperation implementation*, Isig magazine, n. 3/4;

GASPARINI, A., (2003), *The institutionalization of cooperation. Vademecum for a good Euroregion*, in A. Gasparini (ed.), Cross border cooperation in the Balkan-Danube area, Strasbourg: Council of Europe;

GASPARINI, A., (2005), *Studio di fattibilità di un'agenzia di sviluppo delle regioni transfrontaliere di Italia, Slovenia, Austria*, in ISIG 1. Gorizia: ISIG;

GAUNARD, M.F., (2000), *Carte des eurorégions*, *CEGUM*: Aset;

GROSSMAN, R., (1999), *Main basse sur ma langue*, Strasbourg: La Nuée Bleue;

HALL, P., (2008), *Opportunities for democracy in cross-border regions? Lessons from the Øresund region*, in Regional Vienna Studies, 42(3);

ISIG, (2010), *Cooperazione transfrontaliera e interterritoriale in Europa*, Gorizia: Isig;

MARTINEZ, O.J., (1994), *The dynamics of border interaction. New approaches to border Analysis*, in Global Boundaries, World Boundaries, Vol. 1. C.H. Schofield, ed. London-New York: Routledge;

MAURER-FEDER, M.T., (2001), *La Regio Trirhena: une zone de convergence et d'échanges pour trois nations*, Revue d'Allemagne, vol.33, n. 1;

NOMES, (2008), *Le droit de vote européen* (brochure informative), Berne;

OLIVESI, C., (1996), *Du développement structurel à l'espace euro – mediterranéen: les iles et la construction européenne*, in Balme R., Les politiques du néo – régionalisme collective régionale et globalisation, Paris: Economica;

PERKMANN, M., (2003) *The rise of the Euroregion. A bird's eye perspective on European cross-border co-operation*, published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YN, UK, available at http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Perkmann-Rise-of-Euroregion.pdf. (accessed 25/10/2013);

PROTO, P.P. (2008), *Survey on Euroregions and EGTC: what future for the Adriatic area?* Working Paper 45/2008/EN, Rome: Cespi;

REITEL, B., MOINE, A., (2005), *Entre Rhin et Jura, des espaces transfrontaliers ou perdurent des dissymétries spatiales*, in Mappemonde, n.77;

REITEL, B., (2011), *Le Rhin Supérieur, une région transfrontalière en construction ? Une approche géographique à la coopération transfrontalière*, in Wassenberg B. (eds.) Vivre et penser la coopération transfrontalière: les régions transfrontalières françaises, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag;

SCHÄFER, S., (1996), *Kulturraum Oberrhein*, Schriften der Regio 15, Basle-Frankfurt: Helbing und Lichtenhahn Verlag AG;

SANDTNER, M., EDER, S., (2002a), *Une identité régionale transfrontalière? La Regio TriRhena dans la prise de conscience de la population* in Revue Géographique de l'Est, vol. 42 / 1-2 | 2002, available at http://rge.revues.org/2754 (accessed 14/04/2013);

SANDTNER, M., EDER, S., (2002b), *Common spirit in the Upper Rhine Valley? Aspects of regional identity in the Regio TriRhena* in Boundaries and place: European borderlands in geographical context, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield;

SCHULTZ, H., (2003), *Città gemelle di confine: laboratori per l'integrazione europea*, Isig magazine, 12(3/4);

STRASSOLDO, R., (2005), *Euroregioni, Alpe Adria, Mitteleuropa, Prospettive dal Friuli*, Udine: Forum Editrice Universitaria Udinese;

VAN HOUTUM, H., (2007), *An overview of European geographical research on borders and border regions*, Journal of Borderland Studies, 15 (1);

WASSENBERG, B., (2001), *Bilinguisme et coopération transfrontalière dans le Rhin Supérieur*, Revue d'Allemagne, vol. 33, n. 1, 2001;

WASSENBERG, B., (2007), *Vers une eurorégion?: la coopération transfrontalière franco-germano-suisse dans l'espace rhénan de 1975 à 2000*, Bruxelles: Peter Lang;

WASSENBERG, B., (2010a), *Qu'est – ce qui motive la coopération transfrontalière dans l'espace franco – germano suisse? Approche historique*, in Wassenberg B. (eds.) Vivre et penser la coopération transfrontalière: les régions transfrontalières françaises, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

WASSENBERG, B., (2010b), *L'eurorégion du Rhin Supérieur: mythe ou réalité?* in Wassenberg B. (eds.) Vivre et penser la coopération transfrontalière: les régions transfrontalières françaises, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag;

WASSENBERG, B., (2011a), *Historisch gewachsene Governance am Oberrhein (1963-2000)*, in Beck J., Wassenberg B. (eds.) Grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit leben und forschen: governance in deutschen Grenzregionen, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag;

WASSENBERG, B., (2011b), *Conclusions*, in Beck J., Wassenberg B. (eds.) Grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit leben und forschen: governance in deutschen Grenzregionen, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag;

WASSENBERG, B., (2012), *De l'esprit Regio aux Eurodistricts: la place de la société civile dans la coopération transfrontalière du Rhin Supérieur (1963-2008)*, in Kreis G. (eds.) Grenzüberschreitende Mikrointegration del Basler Dreiländerraum gestern- heute- morgen, Basle: Europa Institut of the University of Basle;

WEBER, M., (2011), *Von der schweizerischen Agglomerationspolitik zur Metropolitan Governance im Trinationalen Metropolitansraum Basel*" in Grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit leben und forschen: governance in deutschen Grenzregionen, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag;

WIRTSCHAFTSTUDIE NORDWESTSCHWEIZ, (2003), *Regio TriRhena: die Zahlen: Nordwestschweiz, Südbaden und Haut-Rhin*, Basle: Basler Zeitung;

http://www.regiotrirhena.org.