

Article

The Right to Not Catch Up—Transitioning European Territorial Cohesion towards Spatial Justice for Sustainability

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Abstract: Recent EU environmental and spatial policies notably strive towards the development paradigm of green growth and economic competitiveness. However, operationalizing spatial policies through growth-driven GDP logics promotes an unequal race towards narrowly defined developmental ‘success’, while perpetuating social, economic and environmental inequalities. Meanwhile, the EU’s territorial cohesion approach has remained a conceptual ‘black box’, its apparent inadequacy for notably mitigating territorial disparities leading to renewed questions about territorial policy’s relevance, delivery and evaluation. In this paper, we add to calls for redesigning territorial cohesion by proposing a turn towards spatial justice for territorial sustainability. Pointing out the need to refocus on regional capabilities and alternative development trajectories, we argue that the ‘right to not catch up’ enables a more locally meaningful and globally sustainable development. Drawing from regional statistics, policy analyses and an empirical case study of three European Territorial Cooperation programs in the heterogeneous Austrian-Czech-Slovak-Hungarian border region, we illustrate how current EU spatial policy approaches evolve in regional practice and why current policy aims fall short for sustainable transformations. Through interrogating development discourses and their alternatives, we contribute to emerging new perspectives on sustainable territorial development at the European as well as at regional levels.

Keywords: territorial sustainability; spatial justice; territorial cohesion; regional capabilities; European border regions; cross-border cooperation; regional disparities

1. Introduction

Reflecting the cross-sectoral character of sustainable development, the European Commission’s communication on European values in the globalized world recognizes that “[...] national and social policies are built on shared values such as solidarity and cohesion, equal opportunities and the fight against all forms of discrimination, adequate health and safety in the workplace, universal access to education and healthcare, quality of life and quality in work, sustainable development and the involvement of civil society” [1]. Stretching across social, economic and ecological aspects of development, the concept of sustainability steadily gained relevance for European territorial policies. Included in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and later in the Gothenburg Strategy (2006), the concept is part of European Union’s (EU) current strategic foundation, the EU 2020 strategy (2010) “for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” [2]. Nevertheless, sustainability-related development, as a multidimensional concept, seems to be increasingly replaced by ‘climate change’ as a popular

environmental policy term [2] Unlike sustainability, climate change mitigation and adaption processes come along with messages more easily communicated and understood, while also not being in conflict with current economic-growth-driven development measures [2] However, this perspective runs the risk of missing more holistic approaches to territorial development.

Taking territorial cohesion policies' dominant focus on the economies of scale, combined with urban-friendly policy and regulatory frameworks [3], the EU's spatial policies continue to ignore the fact that the so-called 'growth poles' do not spread evenly [4,5] and mostly lack the desired distributional effects towards their surroundings. Also, the European Commission's approach to climate-related issues through the promotion of green growth is tied to the somewhat misleading belief that economic prosperity and growth, based on a gross domestic product (GDP) rationale, can take place without overstepping ecological limits [6]. As climate concerns have finally captured public and policy attention, recent environmental policy approaches, such as the "European Green Deal" [7], cannot be seen without their interconnectedness with European cohesion measures and current spatial development processes. The European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) already pointed towards the link between environmental issues and territorial cohesion early on, indicating that climate change would negatively add to existing socio-economic imbalances since many economically lagging regions are also the most vulnerable [8]. Thus, political business as usual would inevitably lead to a stronger increase of the already existing spatial inequalities across Europe. However, the connection ESPON drew between environmental issues, sustainable development and territorial cohesion is still surprisingly seldom recalled, and even less frequently interrogated. With fiscally weaker, so-called 'lagging' regions causing significant concerns for Europe's future development, as well as its political stability [9], we point towards the need to adequately understand and address the continuance of unequal social, economic and environmental development dynamics across Europe. Due to the continued adherence to techno-centered approaches on the one hand, and the perpetuation of an economic-growth-driven logic on the other, neither the European Commission's environmental nor its cohesion policy is likely to truly tackle the entangled challenges ahead.

Therefore, we discuss the 'spatial justice approach' as a promising alternative to the current one-dimensional perspective on European territorial development. It insists on the regions' "right to difference" [10], advocating for the spatial dimension of justice to counteract spatial dynamics of injustice, while also taking into account regional needs and capabilities [11,12]. Bearing the potential to add to the policies' aim for sustainable development, we believe that future territorial approaches must allow for differing, regionally anchored definitions of success and finally start to address the social, economic and environmental dimensions of inequity accordingly.

The article proceeds as follows. Firstly, the literature review gives an overview of previous work addressing spatial justice, territorial cohesion and current approaches to sustainability in European policy. In the following section, we introduce our case region, methods and data used. We draw our results from regional data, policy documents and an empirical case study of three European Territorial Cooperation programs in the Austrian-Czech-Slovak-Hungarian border region. Tracing the operationalization of territorial cohesion, we discuss why both inequalities and sustainability have been addressed insufficiently. By reflecting on the statements given by interviewed program stakeholders in our case region, we then illustrate existing tensions between measurement-based program logics and local development. Finally, after pointing out why current policies fail to induce sustainable transformations, we propose the 'right to not catch up' in our concluding discussion as an emerging new perspective on future sustainable territorial development at the European regional level.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Spatial Justice as an Alternative Approach for Territorial Development

Until the late 1980s, it was widely accepted that development represented by a growing GNP (gross national product) per capita was a desirable outcome, pointing towards a change from industrial

to service-based economies [13]. Throughout the 1990s, this perception steadily changed towards development beginning to be viewed more as a multidimensional process, aiming at the improvement of living standards and individual capabilities [14]. With growing complexity through globalization processes, it became more difficult to understand the dynamics driving change. Thus, the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) proposed the HDI (Human Development Index) to capture human development more realistically. Nonetheless, the HDI has remained a rather normative index to date, continuing to simplify the complex ideas of progress or development [15]. That is also the case for the EPI (Environmental Performance Index). Developed by academic institutions in collaboration with the World Economic Forum and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, it evaluates environmental sustainability by creating a synthetic index for environmental performance and aims to shape national environmental strategies [13]. When using synthetic indicators on a larger spatial scale, the main issue that remains is their robustness through time and location, with many variables not being available annually; therefore, they remain contested and seldom allow for concrete policy action [2]. Given the shortcomings in addressing well-being and environmental sustainability through synthetic indicators, a turn towards alternatives is highly probable.

In the wake of the 1970s and 1990s, with theorists including Davies [16], Lefebvre [17], Harvey [18] or Young [10] responding to anti-capitalist struggles in urban spaces by arguing for a necessary transition to a more just and heterogeneous society, the concept of ‘spatial justice’ gained academic attention. In the past decade, resurgent interest in how spatial processes create dynamics of injustice has followed especially Feinstein’s *The Just City* [19] and Soja’s *Seeking Spatial Justice* [20] as conceptual approaches. The authors argue for two key positions. Firstly, space is not a ‘container’ for socio-economic processes [21], therefore creating the need to interrogate both how space influences injustice and how it allows for imagining just alternatives [22]. Secondly, what is ‘just’ varies across space, hence individuals and groups should be enabled to define justice for themselves [23]. Furthermore, spatial justice articulates with the capabilities approach to development introduced by Sen [12,24] and Nussbaum [25,26]. Their understanding conceptualizes development through what people have the “capability to be and do”. Yet, while “freedom and liberty; the ability to live our lives and be happy” [23] are shared goals, capabilities theorists caution against imagining a singular vision of what a perfectly just society should look like [24], as paths to development are multifold.

Academic scholars trying to conceptualize spatial justice for policy analysis [10,11] have therefore strongly advocated for the right to difference, adopting Balibar’s principle of “*égaliberté*” [27]. This principle aims for an approach of freedom and equality, understood as universal principles which are not exclusive to any particular group, where the development and good life of one group do not come at the cost of restricting the freedom and development of others [11]. Also, as Pirie pointed out early on [28], the “justness of a situation may be decided by the person whom it directly affects”, hence it is context dependent and in close association with individual preference and social choice theory. Thus, the conceptualization of space itself must be perceived as something socially constructed. He identifies both the “spatiality of injustice” as comprising physical and locational aspects, as well as more abstract spaces of social and economic relationships sustaining the production of injustice, and the “injustice of spatiality”, understood as the elimination of possibilities for the formation of political responses [28]. Scholars investigating the spatial dimension of justice are addressing topics such as the (lacking) access to, for example, resources [29], infrastructure, transport, housing and health care [30], the job market and welfare state [31,32], or the exposure to environmental risks [33,34]. In line with dependency theorists like Wallerstein [35], others focus on core-periphery concentrations of “spatial unevenness” [11,36,37]. Addressing the (in)justice of power relations, such as dependency, domination or repression of social-spatial ‘actors’ [11,38], these perspectives reflect the multiscale dimensions of justice relating to the uneven impacts of policy measures [39–41].

Capabilities proponents, aiming to address the quality of life in the context of spatial justice, have consequently criticized the use of macroeconomic indicators like GDP to measure developmental ‘success’ as “real human importance”, which is, Nussbaum [26] writes, “located not in GDP but

elsewhere”. This echoes the growing interest in alternative measures of well-being [42] and, as we have outlined above, challenges orthodox views on continued economic growth.

To date, however, spatial justice has primarily been theorized at an urban scale, positioning the city as a driver for modern inequalities and the site for change [18]. However, as “justice and injustice are fused into the multi-scalar geographies in which we live” [20], recent calls for spatial justice to be ‘regionalized’ are urging attention to its implications for spatial planning [43]. Against the background of growing regional disparities [44,45], especially between Europe’s central and peripheral regions, and current socio-political upheavals, the concept of spatial justice allows to explicitly address the uneven spatial impacts of European territorial policies. Thus, it bears the potential to adequately acknowledge and refer to the diversity of European regions (beyond national centers) and their capabilities, while also reflecting on the multiple paths to development from a post-growth perspective on sustainable development.

2.2. Trajectories of European Territorial Development Approaches Under a Growth Premise

European cohesion policy aims to support balanced economic, social and territorial development across all European regions, especially those ‘lagging behind’. Nonetheless, cohesion policies shift towards turning into a tool for regional growth and global-local competitiveness becomes apparent. As Brenner [46,47] points out, ongoing globalization processes are bearing the danger of a deterritorialization of policies, by detaching and disembodiment social relations from places and territories on sub-global scales. Advocating for a re-scaling of governance and new representations of scaling in general, he points out the challenge for European spatial policies of rapidly changing territorial organizations under neoliberal and capitalist development objectives.

However, with the ‘Europeanisation’ of regional and urban policy [4,48–50] spatial policy appears to be increasingly detached from regional scales, following a uniform mantra of development which aims to boost the competitive capacities of regions through their cities [4]. Perceiving cities as drivers for economic growth, European key documents on territorial development like the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) [51], the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion [52], the Territorial Agenda 2020 [2] or the recent White Paper on the Future of Europe [53], however, remain rather vague on how to equally spread growth dynamics across regions [4]. These key documents, aiming at a polycentric development, follow the assumption that economic growth spreads evenly from global to regional urban centers, then further trickles down to medium-sized cities, to finally spill over to their peripheral hinterlands. However, as Rahut and Humer [4] demonstrate, there are trajectories in economic thought, especially when it comes to EU cohesion policies’ balanced territorial impacts. Identifying the policies’ rationale as following the Growth Pole Theory, proposed by Perroux [54] in the 1950s to stimulate French post-war economies, they highlight the negative side-effects of this rather outdated orientation that misses today’s service-economy-driven dynamics [4]. Emphasizing that a motor industry induces a growth phenomenon on weaker industries through dense interactions, Perroux saw industrial linkages as the central element of the theory [5]. Nevertheless, Hirschman [55] acknowledged early on that inter-regional imbalances are inevitable when following economic-growth-driven approaches for territorial development [4,55]. Cohesion policies’ ongoing dominant focus on the economies of scale through agglomeration, clustering and concentration, steadily led to urban-friendly policy and regulatory frameworks [3]. However, since growth poles and their supply chains do not spread evenly across territories [4,5], balanced development cannot be expected. Increasingly cut loose from their immediate locality [56], agglomeration economies lack the desired distributional effects to their surroundings, which fuels inter- and intra-regional imbalances between territories [3–5,50,57,58]. Salai-i-Martin [58] has shown that even though, over a long time period, a pattern of convergence emerged across European regions, the overall convergence speed was rather low and overshadowed regional divergence processes within European countries [3,44]. This trend seems to continue to the present, occurring especially at inner-national peripheries such as border regions [9,44,59–61]. Ignoring these effects seems to be partly a result of cohesion policies’ complex settings for the formulation and

implementation of territorial goals. Its growing importance since the 1970s has made it become a shared policy based on the division of competences between the Member States and the European Community [50,62].

Following the overarching principles of subsidiarity, partnership, concentration, programming and additionally, its implementation requires multi-annual planning, specific financial instruments and budget allocation mechanisms [50]. Undergoing several reforms, the policy steadily changed from supporting wide-ranging ad-hoc projects to a more systematic approach that sets the target objectives which the national bodies then adopt in the process of programming and implementation [2]. With the European Commission's formal acknowledgement of cohesion policies' territorial dimension in the Lisbon Treaty (2007), alongside with economic and social cohesion, it is now placed under Europe 2020 strategy's "inclusive growth priority" [63]. Following a growth rather than a development narrative [64], measuring the policies' impacts according to socio-economic indicators and GDP data comparison at NUTS 2 level (national territorial units with a population size between 800,000 and 3 million), the European Commission never adopted mandatory guidelines to the policies' regional implementation [64]. Combined with the Member States' resistance to centralized regulations and spatial planning not falling into EU competences, territorial cohesion implementation remains highly contested to date [65,66]. Adding to the underlying disagreement between the European Commission and the Member States [65], Doucet [67] also addresses the policies' contradiction in aiming to provide a tool for urban-rural balance and simultaneously for regional competitiveness. Taking the policies' conceptual 'fuzziness', in addition to the mentioned shortcomings, the question of its general use for planning has been raised [68–70]. While some authors [62,71,72] point out the generative function of policy fuzziness helping to gain and maintain Member States' support, others criticize that this leads to multiple individual conceptualizations and incomparable outcomes [70,73]. This becomes especially apparent in heterogeneous regional contexts, where cooperation takes place across borders [70,74].

To support the development of 'disadvantaged' European border regions [75], from the late 1990s on, the European Commission started to support "cooperation for territorial development" [76]. In the 2014–2020 programming period, "European Territorial Cooperation" became one of two major cohesion policy goals, alongside "Investment for growth and jobs". European Territorial Cooperation (better known as INTERREG) thus represents a key instrument for enhancing territorial development to overcome disadvantages resulting from administrative barriers between neighboring regions [48] and for addressing shared challenges. Funding follows three strands of action: cross-border (INTERREG A), transnational (INTERREG B) and interregional (INTERREG C) cooperation. Although the measurable impacts of cross-border cooperation (CBC) on cohesion are limited, cooperation is understood to have a significant qualitative impact and quickly emerged as one of the central instruments of implementing the territorial cohesion agenda among Member States [76]. Increasingly necessitated by growing functional interdependencies between regions, cooperation also became a means to counteract socio-spatial "bordering" and "othering" processes [77].

Nevertheless, with the governing of space remaining a sensitive topic, affecting state sovereignty, territorial cohesion policy is still mainly adopted in territorial containers [66]. Rarely crossing national administrative divisions, it risks missing not only complex societal, but also environmental aspects for future sustainable development of European regions.

2.3. Green Growth, Post-Growth and the Challenge for a Development Beyond Compensatory Measures

Considering the above described approaches to governing territorial cohesion in the European Union, it becomes apparent that spatial policies tend to overlook localized inequities arising from global market dynamics and regional competition. Inequity, and thus the inequality resulting from the different access to resources, is strongly linked to spatial and environmental aspects, challenging the balanced development of territories [34]. As dysfunctional growth dynamics, which provide economic growth while lacking to positively add to the quality of life, continue to be largely unaffected by political instruments [34,78], there is the clear need to move beyond 'more of the same', redistributive

or compensatory logics, displaying ‘development’ under a linear growth premise. Especially since Meadows et al. pointed out the material boundaries of compound growth in their much-noticed work on the *Limits to Growth* in 1972 [79], material production and Western economism began to be questioned [6]. Introducing the term “degrowth” to radically criticize consumerism, growth-oriented development and market capitalism, the debate found its way into various academic discourses [2]. Understood as a consumption degrowth, work-time degrowth or physical degrowth, it was often narrowed down to GDP decrease [6]. However, as most social and economic institutions rely on continuous growth for present functioning, the debate started to involve discourse modes, political measures and instruments aiming for the reduction of economic performance [78]. Furthermore, approaches evolved around the ideas of “green growth” and “post-growth”, often used simultaneously to call for sustainable development action. Nevertheless, while these two positions affect current political debates on development, they pose two opposing views [78]. Following an underlying modernization and innovation approach, “green growth” proponents postulate that economic growth is necessary to maintain and improve quality of life [6,78]. Believing that growth and development can take place without overstressing earth’s ecological limits, this approach builds on an efficiency and marketization logic, following a GDP rationale [6]. In contrast, “degrowth” and “post-growth” are both seen as concepts where further economic growth in ‘wealthier’ countries is not necessary to maintain individual quality of life [2]. Assuming that quality of life can be secured or even increased through transformative processes of societal institutions, notwithstanding falling aggregate economic outputs, the approach is also viewed as creating the ground for alternative environmental visions and tackling aggressive resource (over)exploitation [2]. To counteract the current ‘politics of waiting’ [80], post-capitalist approaches are increasingly calling for alternative perspectives on development. Topics addressed range from micro-political tactics, the creation of alternative spaces, resilience-building strategies, decentralized decision making, common-goods oriented supply structures, collective forms of ownership, nonmonetary forms of exchange or voluntary simplicity [6]. In order to challenge the oversimplified assumptions of structural policies and their often ineffective translation into spatial categories, there is the need for stronger relational and justice-oriented thinking in planning approaches [6,43], based on criteria that better reflect regional diversity, varying needs and actual capabilities for development beyond linear growth premises.

However, over the past decade, the European Commission and the Member States have increasingly become keen supporters of the green growth approach. With current European strategies like the lately introduced “European Green Deal” [7] or the European cohesion policy post 2020 turning their focus mainly towards climate change related issues, such as a “greener and low-carbon Europe” [81], it seems important to address the concepts’ shortcomings regarding a holistic territorial development. As growing criticism is being raised against the desirability of continuous economic growth for well-being, various approaches point out that GDP is an inadequate measure of human prosperity, as it solely aggregates all traded goods and services, notwithstanding their social or environmental effects [6,82,83]. The OECD [84] and the EU’s own EPRS (European Policy Research Center) [85] have repeatedly pointed out the need to look beyond GDP figures in measuring well-being and progress and to better address the issues related to territorial governance [86]. Qualitative and quantitative research demonstrates that economic metrics often do not substantially correlate with area-wide well-being and, therefore, are an insufficient representation for equality and prosperity [6]. Hence, a change in perspective on social-environmental development is needed to ensure measures that go beyond policy ‘greening’ [87] and compensation, enabling mobilization for actual change and allowing for a territorial cohesion policy that is relevant and meaningful for sub-national actors [88].

3. Case Region, Materials and Methods

3.1. Case Region

To trace European policies' complex territorial dynamics in an economic and spatially heterogeneous context, we locate our empirical case study in the Austrian-Czech-Slovak-Hungarian border region. Comprising sparsely populated immediate border regions along the so-called 'green belt'—also known as the former Iron Curtain—and prosperous urban agglomerations such as Vienna and Bratislava. The case region has a turbulent socio-political past and is engaged in re-development. Historically connected during the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918), it was separated through the Iron Curtain along the Austrian border during the Soviet era. Since 1989, cross-border connections have been forged anew, with the region growing closer again following the 2004 Eastern European enlargement and the end of border controls after the 2007 Schengen Agreement. As our case region's history reflects, Europe has long been characterized by the making and breaking of borders [89], creating new areas for development through the change of territorial units and the involvement of supranational territorial policies.

Nevertheless, still strongly categorized as inner peripheries [90], the legacies of long separation linger in the analyzed borderlands. With about 40% of EU territory being classed as border regions [91], the European project's philosophical concern with dismantling internal borders bears a significance for many regions. Therefore, to counteract the enduring socio-economic divides between new and old member states, the emphasis on territorial cohesion, especially through fostering cooperation, has gained importance. The Austrian-Czech-Slovak-Hungarian border region embodies the differences that territorial cohesion aims to overcome, especially with regards to the experienced separation, the persistent language barriers, different developmental states and variety in legal and planning systems, uniting an EU15 member state (Austria joined the EU in 1995) with three Eastern European EU states (joining in 2004). Choosing these heterogeneous borderlands, we aim to examine how current territorial cohesion policy plays out in a context of developmental difference and division.

3.2. Materials and Methods

The present empirical analysis follows a mixed-methods approach. We show the overall development in the case region based on regional data, combining it with a document analysis and explorative expert interviews. Due to the region's heterogeneity, we chose a multiple-case design [92]. To analyze territorial cohesion's shortcomings regarding a spatially just and sustainable regional development, we carried out a qualitative content analysis [93] on: (1) policy documents; (2) program documents of the three chosen INTERREG A programs (2014–2020), Austria-Czech Republic, Slovakia-Austria and Austria-Hungary; and (3) stakeholder interviews we held in 2018 in the case region. Conducting semi-structured expert interviews, mainly in the interviewees' native languages, we dealt with topics covering regional aspects of territorial cohesion. The topics ranged from the professional background of the interviewees and their understanding of the term 'territorial cohesion' to the past and present measures taken for cross-border development and cooperation; the focus areas and regional priority setting; the current program period; the actor network; the program implementation; the sustainability of the program measures and territorial cohesion policies' added value for the border region.

For the purpose of the present paper, we analyzed the sections assessing the stakeholders' perception of the current program measurement and evaluation, overall regional areas of action and problem definition, as well as their recommendations for the upcoming funding period. The face-to-face interviews (n = 25) were held with chosen representatives from national, federal and regional authorities involved in all three INTERREG V-A programs, as well as with representatives from regional planning agencies and national ministries in the case region. Since the group of stakeholders involved in managing European cohesion policy in the border region is relatively small and the actors are well-connected, the selection was based on their long-term experience, function in the cross-border

cooperation programs, as well as on internal recommendations. Therefore, we interviewed all Managing Authorities, long-term Joint Secretary staff, Regional Coordinators and experts such as ministerial representatives and regional development agency staff involved in European cross-border cooperation activities. However, the participants were guaranteed anonymity and will therefore not be identified in further detail. For the final synthesis of the results, we applied data triangulation [94], combining qualitative content analysis (applied on policy documents and interview material) with statistical data on regional development in the border region.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Urban-Rural Divergence and the Missing Redistribution of ‘Justice’

Since the release of the Barca Report [95] in 2009, which aimed to overcome the “black box of cohesion policy” through proposing core priorities and measures for effective policy governance, a more strategic approach to territorial cohesion was introduced. However, given the remaining confusion when it comes to the policies’ handling [64,70,72], which left policies open for multiple localized conceptualizations [13,70,96], it is questionable whether, a decade after the report’s release, the European Commission managed to overcome the knowledge gap when it comes to capturing the policies’ regional impacts. With Eurostat’s database on Member States’ socio-economic and infrastructural data, as well as ESPON’s numerous maps and TIA (Territorial Impact Assessments) reports, there are unquestionably large amounts of national and regional statistics widely available. To give an overall impression on the spatial development in the case region, displayed by large scale data, we firstly looked at the regional GDP as PPS (Purchasing Power Standards) per inhabitant in percent of the EU 28 average (EU 28 = 100%). Representing the dispersion of data points around the mean in percent, we took into account the coefficient of variation (CV). The statistics in Figure 1 show that in the past decade (2006–2017) urban-rural disparities in Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary hardly decreased amongst the NUTS 2 regions [97]. It becomes evident that while Austrian regions show a rather homogenous development over time with a low CV, in contrast, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian regions tend to be strongly inhomogeneous with a higher CV. However, this changes when the capital regions are taken out, pointing towards growing inequalities between the national centers and other regions. While the capital of Austria, Vienna, has, as the only capital region, experienced decreasing GDP figures over the past decade, the other three capital regions’ GDP—those of Prague, Bratislava and Budapest—significantly increased [97]. Especially Slovakia’s capital, Bratislava, shows the strongest growth tendency compared to its surrounding regions. Thus, Slovakia also shows the highest CV (56.18% in 2017), followed by Hungary (CV 47.12% in 2017) and the Czech Republic (CV 41.9% in 2017), while Austria’s CV remains rather low (16.10% in 2017), indicating a more balanced distribution of the GDP amongst the regions.

However, the change in GDP for the individual NUTS 2 regions remained moderate during the observation period [97]. Overall, in the past decade, center regions have continued to outpace others in the concentration of GDP, showing different growth tendencies and pointing towards growing regional divergence, as already observed by Sala-i-Martin [58]. As all centers have remained above the EU GDP-average threshold since 2006 (and very likely before), their actual regional spillovers are questionable, rather pointing towards an economical decoupling from their surroundings. Given the small number of cases for the calculation, no sufficient conclusions can be drawn; thus, Figure 1 can only display a trend regarding the cases examined. Nonetheless, the regional categorization for ERDF and ESF (European Regional Development Fund and European Social Fund) eligibility, grouping NUTS 2 regions into categories ranging from “less developed, transition” to “more developed” regions (see Figure 2) [98–101], backs our observation.

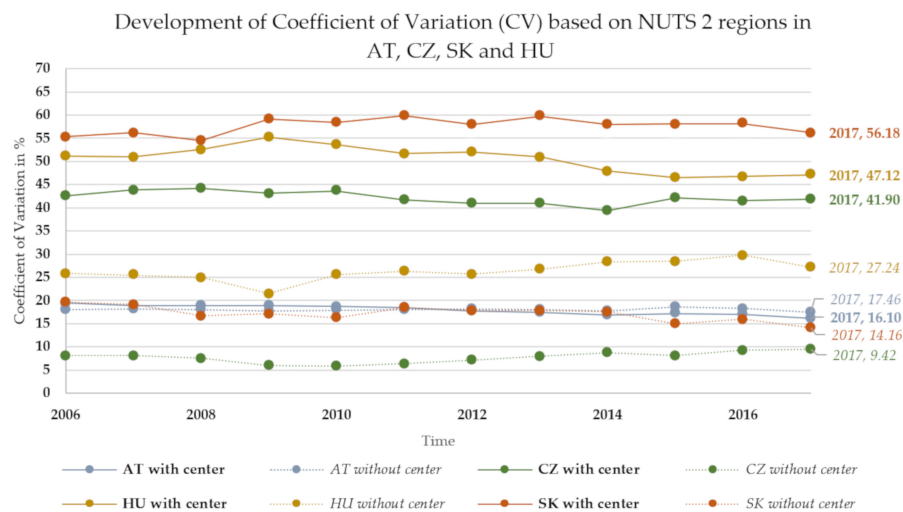


Figure 1. Coefficient of variation showing the development in % of AT (Austria), CZ (Czech Republic), SK (Slovakia) and HU (Hungary) NUTS 2 regions between 2006–2017, based on regional GDP (PPS per inhabitant in % of the EU 28 average; EU 28 = 100) (Source [97], own illustration).



Regional categorization for structural fund (European Regional Development Fund and European Social Fund) eligibility 2014–2020.

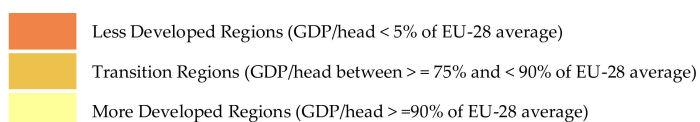


Figure 2. Structural fund (ERDF and ESF) eligibility for 2014–2020, Regional Categorization of NUTS 2 regions in Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia (Source [98–101], own editing).

The urban-rural disparities shown in Figure 2, with regard to inequalities between the national center-regions (all yellow, GDP/head above 90% of EU 28-average), transition regions (orange only

in AT, GDP/head between 75% and 90% of EU 28-average) and less-developed regions (dark orange, GDP/head below 75% of the EU 28-average), are the most observable in Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. Following this classification, it can be stated that non-center (economically weaker) regions have not managed to significantly bridge the GDP gap over the past decades [97].

Considering the aforementioned shortcomings of large-scale data, when it comes to the provision of comparable variables over time, we argue that these figures tell little about actual spatial dynamics on the ground. Measures of economic prosperity, such as GDP per head growth, un-/employment rate, demography, educational attainment, R&D expenditure, broadband connection, share of renewable energy, density of motorways/railways etc., are limited in capturing developments at a finer scale, such as sustainability or well-being in the funded regions. Meanwhile, documents such as DG REGIO's (EU's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy) County Fact Sheets continue to deliver cross-country comparisons of performance displaying the "best and the worst performer in the Union" [101], while serving as the basis for programming period negotiations.

However, the overall lack of comprehensive data across territories, the often purely administrative coordination between statistical offices and stakeholders—especially in CBC programs—as well as the varying data collection methods still produce considerable data gaps [102]. Thus, there must be a stronger reflection on the limits of quantitative data, devoted to display one-dimensional growth dynamics. The displayed development tendencies in our case region only allow for the observation that, after eleven years of cohesion-related spending and almost two full funding periods, the decrease in European urban-rural disparities is more wishful thinking than a measurable reality.

4.2. Operationalizing and Implementing Territorial Cohesion Policies

Scientific attempts to define territorial cohesion have identified dimensions such as "socio-economic, environmental sustainability, territorial polycentricity and territorial cooperation/governance" [64], as well as characteristics clustered around concepts like "competitiveness, innovation, inclusion, environmental quality, energy, territorial structure, connection or governance" [13]. Aiming to clarify the concept in 2008, the European Commission identified and proposed three main fields of action [17]: the aim for "concentration" to overcome differences in density, for "connection" to tackle distance and remoteness, and for "cooperation" to counteract division [2]. However, the current handling of the policies still gives the impression of being more based on a 'we know it when we see it logic', missing the answer to the open, but crucial question: "how do we know it when we see it?" [70].

With differing processes of policy use, ranging from more flexible, participatory measures to normative ones, cohesion policy has been addressed in both constructivist and positivist approaches to planning [13]. However, ESPON's INTERCO project on developing indicators for territorial cohesion [103] already pointed out the clear links between well-being, cohesion and sustainability (Figure 3) in the understanding of the concept.

The project's final report identified sustainable development as being based on the principle of action (for change), the principle of ethics (set of values for economic, social and territorial equity) and the principle of integration (conceptual integration for a multidimensional approach) [103]. Furthermore, with sustainability being a component of well-being and cohesion, cohesion represents a horizontal component across the different dimensions of well-being (economic, social, environmental).

Seven years after the report's release, however, there is still no common understanding of territorial cohesion. As a result, there are no widely comparable indicators to capture the policies' dynamics across European territories to date [13,64]. Given the persistent urban-rural divide and growing regional disparities [9,90], the question of cohesion policies' added value to a balanced territorial development continues to be raised [3,104].

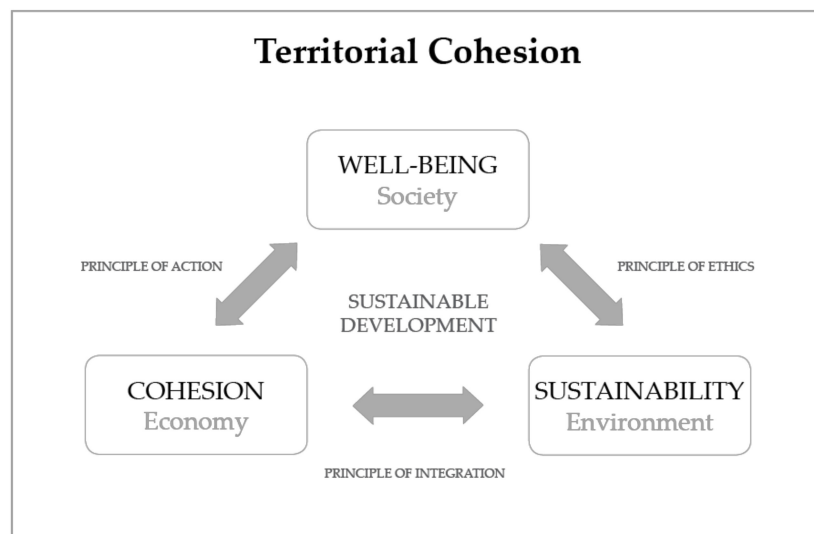


Figure 3. Dimensions and guiding principles of territorial cohesion (Source: [83]; own illustration).

With the European Union’s spatial policies gaining influence on regional and national planning agendas in the past decades, their guiding principles are nevertheless shaping Member States’ concepts, guidelines and strategic documents [48,105]. An example to demonstrate the lived dynamics of European territorial policies are the operational programs for cohesion policy implementation, which follow European legal framework guidelines while simultaneously being negotiated through the so-called programming process carried out by national and regional authorities. In our case region, the focus was laid on the three CBC programs INTERREG V-A Austria-Czech Republic (AT-CZ), INTERREG V-A Austria-Hungary (AT-HU) and INTERREG V-A Slovakia-Austria (SK-AT), analyzing the strategic documents for the programs’ implementation. Reflecting on the main priorities set, we chose the *cooperation program documents*, the *evaluation plans*, to capture the programs’ intended impacts and the *2018 Annual Implementation Report (AIR)* to show the present implementation ‘success’ for analysis. Thereby, we aim to show the development aims, measurement efforts and current implementation ‘progress’.

Following the EU 2020 Strategy goals as their overarching framework, all programs must show a thematic concentration while adopting the same implementation logic. Selecting four priority fields from a pool of eleven Thematic Objectives, given by the Common Provisions Regulation [106], the priorities displayed in Table 1 were chosen in the case study region by the three analyzed cooperation programs.

Table 1. Thematic Objectives (TO) chosen by the three INTERREG V-A programs in the case study region (Source: [107–109]; own illustration).

Selected Thematic Objectives in the Case Study Region	
TO 1	Strengthening research, technological development and innovation
TO 3	Enhancing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
TO 6	Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency
TO 7	Promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures
TO 10	Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning
TO 11	Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration

Together with the priority for Technical Assistance, the Thematic Objectives are further broken down into a maximum of seven Investment Priorities [110], with related Specific Objectives [111], measured through the so-called Result Indicators and Output Indicators (Figure 4).

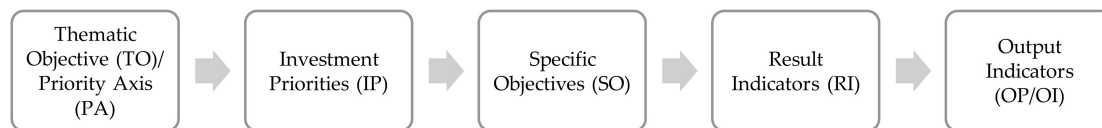


Figure 4. Program implementation logic based on European strategic documents (Source: [106,110,111]; own illustration).

To give an overview of the program's structure, priorities and data used for measurement, we compare the three CBC programs with regard to their TO and IP while also briefly discussing the chosen SO, RI and OP. Overall, the Investment Priorities chosen in our case region are mainly clustered around the topics dealing with research and innovation, environmental protection and resource use, institutional capacities and public administration, education and training as well as with (sustainable) transport infrastructure [107–109]. However, there are noticeable individual differences in the focus setting between the three analyzed programs (Table 2).

Although the AT-CZ program and the SK-AT program have both chosen TO 1 as PA 1 to strengthen research, technological development and innovation, the Specific Objectives and the Result Indicators differ (capturing PA 1 1b, as displayed in Table 2, e.g., through 'hard' Eurostat data in the AT-CZ program, while conducting a survey on cooperation and participation in the SK-AT program). However, the AT-HU program chose TO 3 as PA 1 (Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs), thus showing differing regional needs and political orientations when it comes to economic infrastructure, compared to the two other programs, which did not choose this TO.

All three programs chose TO 6 as PA 2 in order to foster sustainable development in the program region. However, this priority shows strongly varying activities. Ranging from touristic measures aimed at the valorization of natural and cultural heritage (measured through overnight stays in the region) to the increase of eco-innovative potential, improvement of ecosystem services, management and protection of water bodies, to the management of ecological corridors. Looking more into detail, the proposed Output Indicator to measure the Result Indicators in the AT-CZ program surprisingly also includes the reconstruction of roads (up to 10 km). In contrast, the AT-HU program places raising awareness, training and research, as well as the protection of water bodies under that same priority. The SK-AT program furthermore sees the development of products and services for ecological networks and green infrastructure, cultural and natural heritage development and the increase of the expected number of visits at supported sites in line with the protected habitats' improved conservation status. Thus, it seems that this TO 6 is torn between providing a means for tourism promotion, touristic and road infrastructure, while simultaneously pursuing environmental and ecological measures.

Insufficient transnational transport infrastructures still seem to play a significant role in the border regions, as represented by TO 7. This TO has been chosen by the AT-HU and SK-AT program as PA 3, although with differing priorities, ranging from overall improvement of local infrastructure to the enhancement of sustainable mobility. In contrast, the AT-CZ program chose TO 10 as PA 3, investing in education, training and lifelong learning.

All programs chose the specific CBC TO 11 (Enhancing institutional capacity and an efficient public administration) as PA 4, addressing issues such as cross-border cooperation of communities and institutions through joint cultural, educational or community events, labor market and vocational training, or educational cooperation as shared challenges.

Table 2. INTERREG V-A programs in the case region, with chosen thematic and investment priorities (Source: [107–109]; own illustration).

Program	Thematic Objective	Priority Axis	Investment Priority
INTERREG AT-CZ	TO 1	PA 1 Strengthening research, technological development and innovation	IP 1a: Enhancing research and innovation (R&I) infrastructure and capacities to develop R&I excellence, and promoting centers of competence.
			IP 1b: Promoting business investment in R&I, developing links and synergies between enterprises, research and development centers and the higher education sector.
	TO 6	PA 2 Environment and resources	IP 6 c: Conserving, protecting, promoting and developing cultural and natural heritage.
			IP 6 d: Protecting and restoring biodiversity and soil, and promoting ecosystem services through Natura 2000 and green infrastructure.
			IP 6 f: Promoting innovative technologies to improve environmental protection and resource efficiency in the waste sector, water sector and with regard to soil, or to reduce air pollution.
	TO 10	PA 3 Human resources development	ETC Reg. Article 7 (a) iii: Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning.
INTERREG AT-HU	TO 11	PA 4 Sustainable networks and institutional cooperation	ETC Reg. Article 7 (a) iv: Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration by promoting cooperation.
	TO 3	PA 1 Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs	IP 3d: Supporting the capacity of SMEs to grow in regional, national and international markets and to engage in innovation processes.
			IP 6 c: Conserving, protecting, promoting and developing cultural and natural heritage.
	TO 6	PA 2 Protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency	IP 6 d: Protecting and restoring biodiversity and soil, and promoting ecosystem services through Natura 2000 and green infrastructure.
			IP 6 f: Promoting innovative technologies to improve environmental protection and resource efficiency in the waste sector, water sector and with regard to soil, or to reduce air pollution.

Table 2. Cont.

Program	Thematic Objective	Priority Axis	Investment Priority
INTERREG AT-HU	TO 7	PA 3 Promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures	IP 7b: Enhancing regional mobility by connecting secondary and tertiary nodes to TEN-T infrastructure, including multimodal nodes.
			IP 7c: Developing and improving environmentally friendly (including low-noise) and low-carbon transport systems, in order to promote sustainable regional and local mobility.
	TO 11	PA 4 Enhancing institutional capacity and an efficient public administration	ETC Reg. Article 7 (a) iv: Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration by promoting cooperation.
INTERREG SK-AT	TO 1	PA 1 Contributing to a smart cross-border-region	IP 1b: Promoting business investment in R&I, developing links and synergies between enterprises, research and development centers and the higher education sector.
	TO 6	PA 2 Fostering natural and cultural heritage and biodiversity	IP 6 c: Conserving, protecting, promoting and developing cultural and natural heritage.
			IP 6 d: Protecting and restoring biodiversity and soil, and promoting ecosystem services through Natura 2000 and green infrastructure.
	TO 7	PA 3 Supporting sustainable transport solutions	IP 7c: Developing and improving environmentally friendly (including low-noise) and low-carbon transport systems, in order to promote sustainable regional and local mobility.
	TO 11	PA 4 Enhancing institutional capacity and an efficient public administration	ETC Reg. Article 7 (a) iv: Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration by promoting cooperation.

With regards to the data collection used for the Result Indicators and Output Indicators, we overall observe a wide range of sources, including Eurostat data, national statistics, environmental databases, individual measurement tools and individually conducted surveys—even to capture the same IP. Thus, the methods differ not just between the priorities, but also when it comes to the measurement within the same TO across the programs.

In addition, the data collection methods for the programs' evaluation, carried out to assess program effects and impacts in the program region, although addressing the same topics, vary between the three

programs when it comes to the methodology used. Ranging between surveys among the beneficiaries, general data collection, data derived from the Electronic Monitoring System (eMS), website analytics, desk research, interviews, project reports, experimental and statistical methods, focus groups, expert panels etc., they are conducted internally or with the help of specialized agencies [112–114]. Therefore, we need to question the comparability of the reported effects and impacts of territorial cohesion policy measures across territories.

Taking the latest Annual Implementation Reports (AIR) for 2018 [115–117], it becomes apparent that—together with the delayed implementation of all three programs—they were not (or were only partially) able to meet the overall proposed performance framework regarding the milestones and financial implementation plans.

Table 3 shows the differing allocation of funding between the three programs in 2018, four years after the start of the funding period.

Table 3. Chosen cooperation program allocation of funding according to the three Annual Implementation Reports (AIR) 2018 reports for the Priority Axes 1–4, without Technical Assistance (Source: [107,115–117]; own illustration).

Program	PA 1	TO	PA 2	TO	PA 3	TO	PA 4	TO
AT-CZ	81%	TO 1	77%	TO 6	56%	TO 10	38%	TO 11
AT-HU	59%	TO 3	82%	TO 6	96%	TO 7	66%	TO 11
SK-AT	17%	TO 1	5%	TO 6	0%	TO 7	22%	TO 11

The AT-CZ program already allocated 81% to the PA 1, with 99% to IP 1a while IP 1b only holds 54% [115]. Therefore, research cooperation in R&I seems to be of higher priority than business investment for R&I in the program's region. With a total allocation of 77%, PA 2 indicates that while IP 6c (72%), aiming at the protection and conservation of cultural and natural heritage, and IP 6f (49%) are devoted to promoting innovative services and technologies for environmental protection, they show moderate tendencies of funding allocation; however, IP 6d, striving for protection and restoration of biodiversity and soil as well as the promotion of ecosystem services, has already over exceeded its planned budget (119%). However, PA 3, with IP 10a (56%), investing in education and training, and PA 4 (38%), aiming to enhance sustainable networks and institutional cooperation, are rather underemployed [2].

In comparison, the AT-HU program shows that only 59% of the funds are allocated for PA 1 IP 3d to enhance the competitiveness of the SMEs [116]. However, PA 2, aiming to protect the environment and promote resource efficiency, has already allocated 82% for all IP (6c, 6d, 6f). In contrast to the SK-AT program, PA 3, aiming at the promotion of sustainable transport and network infrastructures, shows a 96% utilization rate for IP 7b and 7c, while PA 4 (66%) points toward a moderate allocation.

Finally, the SK-AT program performance shows results difficult to compare. Due to the programs' late designation (August 2018) and implementation, PA 1 only reaches 17% of the target value for 2018 [117], aiming to foster research, technological development and innovation. With PA 2 and its IP (6c, 6d), aiming for the valorization of cultural and natural heritage and the management of ecological corridors, getting to only 5% of the 2018 target value, PA 3 and IP 7c, aiming at sustainable transport solutions, do not show any performances at all. PA 4, targeting the improvement of institutional capacity building and efficient public administration, however, reached 22% of the target value [2].

Overall, the programs' thematic focuses display similar development needs in the case region, although with slightly different priorities when it comes to investments. Considering, for example, TO 6, which aims to provide environmental and resource efficiency measures, the 'creative leeway' to cover multiple agendas becomes observable in all three programs. However, the different implementation states with regards to the programs' reported 'progress', point towards regional dynamics that are hardly addressed in the 2018 AIR, telling only little about the programs' development beyond a general

program ‘performance’. Moreover, the different evaluation approaches raise the question of whether comparable statements on the programs’ success can be made based on the provided data.

However, all three programs reflect the aforementioned dimensions of territorial cohesion in addressing societal (well-being), economic (cohesion) and environmental (sustainability) aspects of regional development. Nonetheless, the EU’s rationale, following a ‘do it—measure it—report it’ understanding of regional effects, seems to create multiple approaches to prove regional development, while also posing significant challenges for the program implementations in cross-border regions, making it difficult to understand the policies’ effects on a softer scale.

4.3. Regional Problem Definition, Implementation and Territorial Cohesion Post-2020

Considering the regional aspects of territorial cohesion policies, we asked the stakeholders for their problem definition and focus setting, challenges in the policy formulation and implementation, as well as their future wishes for the post-2020 program period. Thereby, we aim to address and display the ‘softer’ aspects of territorial policies and the regional practice of program drafting and implementation. According to the interviewees, the selection of regional priorities for cooperation programs is a multifaceted process, building on strategic national documents, studies, external consultants, evaluations from previous program periods and bilateral negotiation processes. Given that CBC programs are highly regionalized compared to transnational programs, the “funding pots” are also regarded as such. One interviewee thus points out that “every federal state tries to get the funds it has put into the program, so to speak, back out again through projects” [Int_10_1 2018: 2].

In addition to the already complex setting of different language and cultural backgrounds, there is also a slight imbalance of responsibilities in the decision-making process. In the centralist-organized countries, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, ministry representatives hold the responsibilities for decision making, while the regional representatives have mainly a consultancy function [Int_12_10_2, 16, 17, 18 2018]. Austria, in contrast, is organized in federal states that attach importance to the regional level in spatial planning differently [118]. Thus, regional representatives (the so-called Regional Coordinators) represent the program in all territorial decisions.

Overall, in the course of the programming process, the main challenge mentioned was to find the right amount of compromises, and “[...] balance between the interests [...] [to] write a program together, so that everyone can find [their priorities] again” [2]. With different development standards, the cooperating regions face the challenge that there are different views on “What is important in cross-border cooperation?” [2,4]. One interviewee points out an example from the Austria-Czech Republic program, noting that, while “[...] tourism, for example is still a big issue in the Czech Republic [or] the restoration of buildings [...]”, [i]n Austria, this is not or only partially important, [thus there are] [...] different weightings. You try to work this out somehow in the course of the programming and then write it into a program. And that builds the basis for the decision making” [2,4]. Similar dynamics are also observable in the other two CBC programs.

When it comes to the priorities set, however, the actors note that, overall, they did not change significantly over time for the three programs [Int_11_1, 13, 21, 23, 14 2018]. While the main focus on issues tackling tourism, natural and cultural heritage, infrastructure or language training remained constant, a stronger focus on R&D, institutional cooperation and issues targeting sustainable resource use developed more recently [Int_11_1, 14, 17, 18_1 2018]. Some actors point out that the only significant thematic shift was away from labor market related topics, that were under stronger focus in the previous program period (2007–2013) as a consequence of the Schengen Agreement and the EU Eastern enlargement [Int_9, 10, 11, 23 2018].

Instead, the actors highlighted the positive change in the intensity of the cooperation. The introduction of the ‘lead partner principle’ for the 2007–2013 program period and the changed framework conditions [Int_12_1, 13, 14_1 2018], led to a development where the “[...] [programs] have gone from INTERREG in cooperation with PHARE CBC [pre-accession CBC programs] to a joint INTERREG program” [Int_12_1 2018: 2]. Reflecting on that shift, a program actor concludes that “[a]t

the same time, this was a greater challenge because we really had to work out common topics [whereas before] it was more of a coexistence. That is, I take a partner who co-signs and acts as a ‘silent partner’ in a partnership, and everyone does—not what they want, of course under the motto of cooperation, but—more or less they run in parallel worlds [. . .]” [2].

However, measuring and reporting the programs’ cross-border dynamics remains a challenge for all programs. Capturing the program impacts, one program authority points out that, especially the indicator selection, alongside with the budget allocation, caused numerous debates and confusion. Thus, an external planning agency which supported the programming group “[. . .] had to just make something up. Of course, based on their experience and we trusted them on that back then. After all, the Commission has approved it, [although] [n]ow we are struggling a little bit with it.” [Int_8 2018: 7]. Furthermore, it was pointed out that the European Commission tends to follow a rather theoretical model with proposing the impact orientation, not reflecting on the reality of the programs and their only very limited impacts on socio-economic developments in the program regions [Int_18_2, 20 2018]. Although there is a strong commitment to the need to somehow quantify the projects’ progress in general, as one interviewee puts it, the indicators chosen tend to be “[. . .] very general, because you have so many different, diverse projects, that it is difficult to apply one single measure to everything. That’s why we still have the individual outputs for each project, which actually tell you more about the project. [Though] they will not be reported [to the Commission]. That is just to measure the progress of the project when a report comes in. But I must say, I find them more meaningful” [Int_17 2018: 15]. Taking this into account, the program’s ‘verifiable’ success when it comes to what is reported back to the European Commission seems to be mainly perceived through its ability to allocate funding in the set time periods [Int_17, 19_2 2018]. This puts the program authorities under intense pressure for continuous justification to meet the target thresholds, notwithstanding regional, socio-economic or administrative dynamics. CBC programs are being further torn between two legislative systems, with varying federal and national authorities involved in so-called first level and second level controls, as well as certifying authorities; this adds several complications and an enormous amount of bureaucracy to the already complex program implementation structure [Int_18_1 2018]. Also addressed through other CBC program assessments [74,119,120], all interviewed stakeholders pointed out their growing frustration with the administrative burden, often overshadowing the actual programs’ progress when it comes to their ability to fund projects that address the improvement of so-called ‘softer aspects’ and quality of life at the regional level (such as medical cooperation, environmental or joint education programs across the borders). One program actor, involved in more than one CBC program, states that there are “[. . .] far too many players with far too many different functions for only little money” [Int_18_1 2018: 7]. With the growing complexity of the programs creating the need for professionalization that leads to the decrease of smaller actors, such as non-governmental organizations [Int_2, 10_2, 12_1, 13, 16 2018], the imbalance regarding different co-financing rates and overall differing regulations across the participating countries also poses significant challenges for the program implementation in general [Int_10_1, 19_2 2018].

One interviewee, responsible for the program administration in the Joint Secretary, thus states that “[t]he project-specific and overall objectives and project results, these four levels alone, beneficiaries [. . .] cannot make out a difference easily. [. . .]. [The] differences in the wording are hardly perceptible [. . .]. [So] it has [. . .] become too complicated and the simplification is not always successful either. Especially when it comes to personnel cost accounting, but also some others. [Additionally], the controlling bodies want to make sure that the old principles [. . .] are maintained, [opting for] one hundred percent security [. . .], [and thus], some people create extra rules to secure themselves with—it’s called gold-plating—and I think it’s everywhere [. . .]” [Int_13 2018: 9]. Thus, with INTERREG becoming a mainstream program, “[. . .] the flexibility and the contribution to European integration is increasingly neglected. Because [with the] program [. . .] having to meet the EU 2020 targets and contributing to impact indicators, this is increasingly a challenge. Whether this is an improvement is

hard to tell. However, the balancing act becomes even greater at the level of administrative processing" [Int_12_1 2018: 7], one interviewee summarizes the current situation.

Reflecting on these obstacles, we also asked the stakeholders to give recommendations and state future wishes for territorial cohesion policy when it comes to the upcoming planning period. Unsurprisingly, almost all actors point out the need for a decrease of the administrative burden and bureaucracy for all program levels, together with effective simplification measures in order to make the program attractive again and counteract decreasing project application numbers [Int_8, 9, 10_2, 11_2, 17, 16, 20 2018]. An interviewee states that she wishes "[...] that programs are downgraded back to a tolerable level of administration [...] [s]o that they can do what they actually intend to do, namely, to promote good cross-border projects in a way that the project partners are able to implement the projects" [Int_10_2 2018: 14f.]. Furthermore, she notes that "Of course there have to be controls, [...] we are talking about public money, but the way we are currently handling [the programs] is just beyond good and evil. So [if this remains the same], we can actually stop [doing what we do] because it is simply too costly for all parties involved" [2]. Another program authority also states that although there are definitely a lot innovative project ideas in general, these ideas are often not realized, as applicants cannot handle the administration requirements, often already struggling with the application forms. As a result, there are many projects building on old partnerships, creating a 'more of the same' continuance when it comes to the project landscape [Int_16 2018: 3].

Calling for greater continuity where possible with regard to the upcoming program period [Int_11_2, 19, 22 2018], the actors furthermore refer to the burden of being forced to start all over again every seven years. Criticizing the often missing cross-border planning character, with a largely thematic instead of a content-based focus, they also view the programs as being more a means for national/regional distribution of funding, rather than planning in functional regions based on their needs, capabilities and interdependencies across national borders [Int_9, 11_1, 23 2018]. Therefore, concluding on these developments, one interviewed actor notes that he believes "[...] that cross-border cooperation itself is a value, although this is hardly derivable from statistical indicators," thus asking further: "how can we say that the program is successful then?" [Int_13 2018: 19]. Answering this question, he pointedly states that the "program is successful, because we build up a relatively stable cooperation, even in the constantly changing institutional and personal [settings] [...], we can put this cooperation back on its feet; because we continuously learn from each other; because the learning process is mutual, both at project and program level, because the demand for cross-border co-financing—not only for financing – but for the cross-border projects, for cross-border cooperation, is there and new developments, new project ideas, new innovative ideas are constantly emerging. I think that is in itself a success" [2].

Reflecting on the statements discussed, the tensions between the current program logics and local capabilities for development become apparent. Drawing from an analysis of the French–German PAMINA cross-border region, Terlouw [74] already highlighted the structural mismatches between the scales of different cross-border relations. Pointing out the vertical mismatches, linked to the differences in the horizontal logics of economic and administrative cross-border relations, he has shown the disconnection of regional success of European economic integration from the cross-border region. Picking up Nussbaum's [26] critique on macroeconomic synthetic indicators to measure developmental progress, we need to ask whether the current representation of 'success' allows to actually induce sustainable territorial development (beyond GDP figures), or rather serves the maintenance of the regional status quo.

Taking into account the empirical findings, which showcase the differences between the integration and implementation of cohesion policy goals in regional development, we do, on the one hand, confirm observations of related studies on cross-border cooperation when it comes to the distributive logics of European policy measures [121–125]. However, we also show that regional diversity creates uneven impacts when using uniform policy interventions and illustrate the context and scale dependency of the perception of sustainable development and spatial justice in the analyzed regions.

5. Conclusions

Pointing out the growing critique on supranational cohesion policies' continued following of a growth narrative, rather than a development one, we identify the need for alternative approaches to a spatially just development. Tracing these ideas through literature, we furthermore demonstrate the complementarity of emerging concepts of post-growth and spatial justice informed by the capabilities approach to development. Rarely crossing borders according to actual regional interdependencies, present European territorial policy approaches seem to be more about resource distribution than actual spatial organization and planning, thus failing to address rising territorial inequalities in the analyzed regions. Turning to an analysis of regional statistics, CBC program documents and empirical data from the Austrian-Czech-Slovak-Hungarian border region, we highlight the need for change from current GDP-based growth models towards heterogeneity and plural paths to transformative futures. Against the backdrop of persisting urban-rural disparities and continuing spatial inequality in the past decade, the ongoing 'more of the same' administrative routine allows for a perception of 'success', that is mainly based on the allocation of funding and seems comfortable with the status quo as long as in- and outward payments are at equilibrium. Considering sustainability to be a central dimension of territorial cohesions' aim for balanced development, however, growing disparities additionally put those regions at danger which are often already the most vulnerable when it comes to social, economic and environmental inequality.

Nevertheless, current development measures seem to lead towards the continuance of existing spatial inequalities across the investigated border regions. The analyzed data indicate that using the current growth-driven approaches to development does not capture the dimensions of territorial cohesion at the regional scale adequately, instead mirroring a catch-up-driven struggle for locational competition. In contrast to other approaches, we thus identify the right to difference through a spatial justice perspective, as bearing the potential to transition territorial cohesion to a post-growth paradigm for a more spatially just and sustainability-oriented policy. Concluding on the presented literature and the discussed empirical findings, we point out two central dimensions of spatial justice relevant for future planning approaches. Firstly, capability-oriented approaches must stronger address horizontal aspects of justice, dealing with the access to and provision of resources (e.g., to democratic and legal institutions, labor market, welfare state, social and community systems, infrastructure, housing, transportation or environmental 'goods'). Secondly, spatial policies also need to reflect on vertical aspects of justice, such as the participative capabilities when it comes to just power relations to avoid dependency, dominance and oppression [11,16,19,26,38,43,126].

In calling for the 'right to not catch up', we do not intend to romanticize rurality, the dismantling of infrastructure, the refusal of change, or even more assent to leaving regions behind. Rather, we describe two inter-related shifts in regional development policy and discourse. Regionalizing spatial justice calls attention not only to how spaces are occupied, but also to how they are measured and assessed. If we are to accept that regions have the right to determine and pursue meaningful futures according to their own needs, contexts and endogenous capabilities, we cannot presume that their progress can be measured along a singular, economic-based development path. However, this is the fundamental flaw in current approaches to territorial cohesion. Shifting the perspective from an economic race with rules set by the winners, outcomes dependent on continuous growth and a system multiplying non-comparable outcomes, this leads us to insist on the 'right to not catch up' as a thought experiment that interlinks spatial justice and territorial sustainability. In doing so, our contribution joins long-running critiques on territorial cohesion implementation and measurement, increasing dissatisfaction with business-as-usual models, as well as calls for genuine action in spatial policies to mitigate negative climate change impacts.

Additionally, with the European Member States' growing emphasis on the protection of their sovereignty and autonomy, present policy handling runs the risk of missing the aim for cross-national coordination of environmental, climate and social policy action. Against the background of current global upheavals, adding to climate change and growing socio-economic inequalities, as well as with

the ongoing transition into the new funding period (2021–2027), it seems to be the right moment to call for a changed perspective to sustainable territorial development. In this context, a comprehensive approach based on the capabilities of the regions seems to be best suited to initiate green and just policy approaches. There are several reasons why we believe that the European Commission ought to take a keen interest in spatial justice. First, as our case region suggests, a shift from ‘catch up’ discourses to spatial justice could help maintain and strengthen the Member States’ commitment to the supranational community, including by considering differing political cultures. Second, by foregrounding regional capabilities, spatial justice could initiate a more sensible use of funds and thereby help address spatial inequalities (more) specifically, in more context-related ways, and relevant to the regional actors—to those governing and also those being the recipients of the policies’ measures. In turn, by thinking differently about how to mitigate regional disparities beyond a dependency-based framework, regions would be enabled to take on more responsibility for their development. Finally, at a time when cohesion policy is clearly under pressure and arguably in crisis [9,127], spatial justice holds the potential to renew the fundamental ambitions for European peacekeeping as well as territorial cohesion. In this sense, spatial justice does not interfere with the object of territorial cohesion but marks a much-needed shift from fuzzy fragmentation [70] to sustainable human and environmental flourishing.

Hence, we urge for attention to spatial justice and sustainability as two sides of the same coin, neither met with one-dimensional interventions in funding mechanisms, nor ‘greening’ existing growth models. Given the fact that the current economic logics do not apply the same way to regions as they (in theory) do for markets, and no ‘invisible hand’ will regulate the European regions’ fate, there is the need for developing future practicable alternatives and the deconstruction of present assessment logics. Furthermore, in order to gain knowledge on the policies’ actual added value to regional development, there should be a stronger distinction between territorial cohesion’s long-term social-spatial effects, such as trust-building and the establishment of new governance structures, as well as short-term, ‘hard’ data-driven ‘correlations’, such as the reconstruction of natural and cultural heritage and regional overnight stays. However, since present approaches to the policies’ outcomes seem to actively take into account trade-offs in significance in favor of (relative) data comparability, by leaving out the regional context, cohesion policy measures are unlikely to truly tackle the actual challenges ahead. Since current indicators for ‘success’ and ‘failure’ do not display regional dynamics adequately, a change of perspective is needed to actually address the recurring question of whether structurally weak regions, despite their ‘not catching up’, should continue to get European funding at all.

Above all, European territorial policy needs stronger interlinking with regional planning instruments, as these are currently running parallel, in order to actually address ongoing development challenges of European regions. It is only by addressing the similarities and differences of regions adequately through policy re-scaling, a stronger coordination of European, national and regional goals for development and the alignment of planning horizons, that regional visions get the actual chance to be operationalized and implemented in local contexts. Overlooking current policy limitations and keeping the present approach towards development may lead to even more social-spatial polarization at the expense of environmental aspects [34], territorial cohesion and thus sustainable territorial development [128]. Therefore, further research on the methodology for and operationalization of spatial justice, as well as on its options and limitations is needed to better understand the relationship between the added value presented by the respective approach and the necessary concessions. The pressing need for genuinely sustainable solutions for Europe’s diverse regions in today’s challenging times surely makes the effort of finding answers for complex questions worthwhile.

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