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## **An Organizational Ecology Approach to EGTC Creation in East Central Europe**

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European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) are a legal instrument intended to facilitate institutional cross-border cooperation. Launched in 2006, EGTC creation was particularly swift in East Central Europe, albeit with significant variation between different border regions. The article adopts an organizational ecology perspective to explain this variation and argues that the level of organizational density inside a cross-border ecological niche is crucial for EGTC creation. The analysis draws on policy documents and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from four border areas in East Central Europe. It finds that lower levels of organizational density in unitary states constitute a favourable organizational environment for EGTC creation. However, rather than enhancing autonomous decision-making in the border region, we find evidence that unitary state support for EGTC creation reflects a political strategy to centralize control over cross-border cooperation.

**Keywords:** Cohesion Policy; cross-border governance; European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC); organizational ecology

## **1. Introduction**

Institutionalized cross-border cooperation of sub-national actors has been a part of European integration since the late 1950s, when the Euregio was established at the Dutch-German border (Wassenberg, Reitel and Peyrony, 2015; Scott, 2017). In the absence of a supranational instrument, cooperation between sub-national actors either required the conclusion of an interstate agreement or was based on non-binding memoranda of understandings. Even under the 1980 Madrid Outline Convention, sub-national actors were still ‘implicitly hindered’ from engaging in direct cooperation because they ‘could not bypass state control’ (Nadalutti, 2013: 759). Hence, bureaucratic hurdles and limited planning certainty kept the transaction costs of cross-border cooperation high (North, 1992).

In 2006, the EU launched an instrument to address this situation: the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) regulation enables direct and legally binding cooperation, based on a shared legal personality (Eckardt and Okruch, 2017). The EGTC regulation has been called the ‘first European legal basis for territorial cooperation’ (Nadalutti, 2013: 760) because it created the possibility for direct, sustained, and autonomous cross-border cooperation among sub-national actors. Research has highlighted EGTC’s ‘enormous potential of becoming strategic and functional engines for strategy-making and policy delivery’ (Haselsberger & Benneworth 2010: 93). Similarly, Zapletal (2010: 25) believes that these ‘new governance contracts’ could facilitate ‘local development and deeper European integration’.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the number of EGTCs has grown since 2006 (see section 2, Figure 1). At the same time, this growth has been highly uneven across the EU and, especially, in East Central Europe. Given the positive evaluation of EGTCs in the above-mentioned literature, this variation raises a question: Why were

EGTCs created at some borders, but not at others? By adopting an organizational ecology approach to answering this question, we emphasize the role of structural conditions for EGTC creation and complement existing agency-centred research. We compare four ‘diverse’ cases of border regions. Our data sources are Partnership Agreements and INTERREG programs, as well as semi-structured interviews with cross-border program administrators, euroregion representatives, and EGTC staff. Section *two* contains the problem description and the theoretical framework. Sections *three* details the methodology. Section *four* and *five* contain the analysis. Section *six* concludes with policy implications and proposals for future research.

## **2. Explaining variation in EGTC creation: An organizational ecology approach**

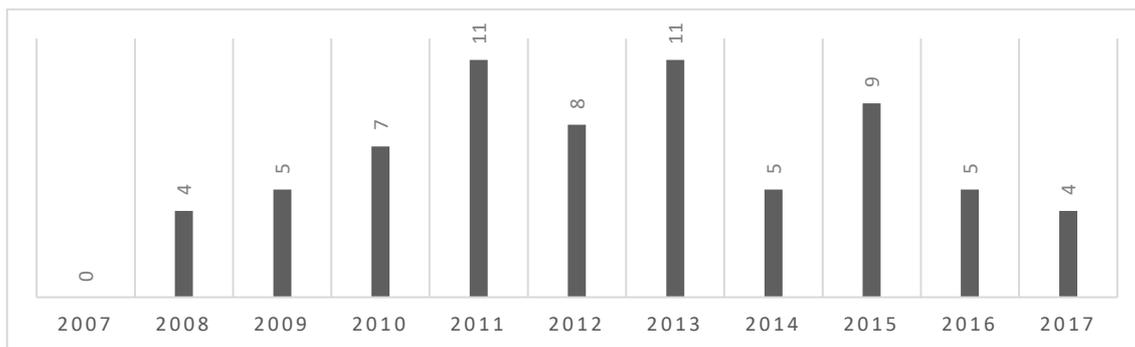
This section illustrates the variation in EGTC creation across the EU. It shows that East Central Europe has witnessed a particularly rapid, yet uneven, increase in the number of EGTCs. With the intention to abstract from contextual factors, like history, culture, or individual choice, the section introduces organizational ecology as a decidedly structural theory of institutional change. Finally, the organizational ecology framework is fine-tuned to the study of EGTC creation.

### ***a) Problem description: variation in EGTC creation across the EU***

The instrument was launched in 2006 and EGTC creation picked up towards the end of the 2007-2013 programming period, subsequently dropping back to lower levels in the 2014-2020 period (Figure 1). At the time of writing, a total of 69 EGTCs existed across the EU (Committee of the Regions 2017): 60 cross-border, four transnational, and five network EGTCs which are not limited to a specific borderland region. While half of all

cross-border EGTCs are concentrated in East Central Europe, they are virtually absent from Northern Europe. The most active member states are Hungary (24), France (19), Slovakia (17), and Spain (14).

**FIGURE 1.** EGTC creation over time (2007-2016)



Source: Own elaboration based on Committee of the Regions (2017)

Variation in EGTC creation is particularly high in East Central Europe. In particular, the Hungarian-Slovak border has the highest number of EGTCs of all EU borders, but neither the neighbouring Hungarian-Austrian nor the Slovak-Austrian borders have any EGTCs (Figure 2). Moreover, Austria has one of the lowest numbers of cross-border EGTCs of all EU states (2) and neighbouring Hungary has the highest number (24), despite their similarity in terms of location, size, and number of national borders. How can this variation be explained?

**FIGURE 2.** Number of EGTC per member state and per border\*



Correspondingly, the article asks how EGTC creation is affected by organizational environment and whether it influences the actual organizational properties of EGTCs.

Our theoretical framework builds on a key distinction between two organizational forms, which Abbott, Green, and Keohane (2016) have introduced in an article on institutional change in global climate governance. They observe that growth in the number of intergovernmental organizations, like the World Trade Organization or the European Union, has ‘slowed markedly’ in recent years. At the same time, private transnational organizations ‘have emerged and are expanding rapidly’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The latter are ‘governed by civil society, business or other sectors’ and ‘engage directly in transnational governance’ by adopting voluntary standards to reduce transaction costs (247-248). We suggest that EGTCs resemble what Abbot et al. (2016) call intergovernmental organizations and that cross-border euroregions resemble private transnational organizations. EGTC creation, thus, faces similar constraints as intergovernmental organizations. Because Abbot et al.’s (2016) distinction of organizational forms is central to our argument, we have chosen to closely follow the organizational ecology approach developed in their paper and to adapt it to the study of EGTC creation.

Abbot et al. (2016:249) review several theories of institutional change (i.e. functionalist theory, theories of self-regulation, organizational theories, principal-agent theory) and find them ‘incomplete because they overemphasize agency at the expense of structure’. In their view, organizational ecology provides a complementary framework for understanding institutional change as it emphasizes ‘the influence of institutional environments, especially their organizational density and resource availability, on organizational behaviour and viability’ (Abbott et al., 2016: 247).

The organizational ecology approach is built around three key concepts: (1) organizations, (2) populations and niches, and (3) organizational density. First, Abbott et al. (2016: 256) understand institutions as bundles of rules and practices and organizations are viewed as ‘institutions capable of exercising agency’. Second, the primary unit of analysis is not the individual organization, but the population. A population is made of organizations which share key features, pursue similar activities, and rely on a ‘common set of resources’. Because of their common resource dependency, ‘organizations within a population respond similarly to changes in their environment.’ (Abbott et al., 2016: 257). As they depend on the same resources for their survival, they occupy the same ecological niche. For example, Abbott et al. (2016: 257) state that organizations which ‘regulate and certify emissions reduction credits for sale in the voluntary carbon market constitute a population’ because they ‘require similar social, material, and political resources’. Organizations which are involved in setting standards for city renewable-energy programs belong to a different population, ‘distinguishable on each of these features, and perceived as distinct by relevant audiences’. Third, organizations are expected to compete more forcefully for resources when organizational density within an ecological niche is high. Density is understood as the relationship between the ‘extent and complexity of governance activities’ and the ‘resources available for that population’ (p. 258).

Regarding change, organizational growth and patterns of change are depicted as the balance between organizational ‘founding’ and ‘dissolution’ rates. Organizational success is determined by two key processes: legitimation and competition. When a new organizational form, such as the EGTC, emerges there is an initial positive relationship between the number of existing organizations and their legitimacy, corresponding to the logic of appropriateness. This early success, however, contributes to higher institutional

density, which leads to growing resource constraints and the onset of an ecological process of selection. At a certain point, the positive relationship between density and growth is inverted and competition becomes the dominant pattern (Abbott et al., 2016: 259).

Crucially, Abbott et al. (2016: 260-261) distinguish between two types of organizations: ‘slow-but-stable’ organizations have low reproduction rates, are unable to respond rapidly to new opportunities and challenges but they have high survival rates due to their substantial resources. By contrast, ‘rapid-but-fragile’ organizations have high production rates and can rapidly respond to new opportunities and challenges. But greater resource constraints limit their survival chances. Under conditions of organizational density ‘slow-but-stable’ organizations *compete* for resources within their niche, while “rapid-but-fragile” organizations avoid competition by *adapting* to new niches. Intergovernmental organizations (and EGTCs) correspond to the former type, private transnational organizations (and euroregions) correspond to the latter type.

Building on these assumptions, Abbott et al. (2016: 261-264) argue that private transnational organizations have higher founding rates than intergovernmental organizations. Moreover, in niches with low institutional density, they also exhibit high survival rates. Finally, they flexibly adapt to opportunities and challenges, such as forging strategic relationships with intergovernmental organizations to gain legitimacy and resources. As a result, Abbot et al. (2016) conclude, growth rates of private transnational organizations exceed those of intergovernmental organizations in climate governance. We suggest that the same dynamics explain variation in EGTC creation in East Central Europe.

### ***c) Adapting Organizational Ecology to the Analysis of EGTC Creation***

Adapting the organizational ecology framework to the study of EGTC creation, we focus on organizational dynamics in cross-border ecological niches. The EU's program for cross-border cooperation, INTERREG, significantly influences resource availability and cross-border governance in the EU. Therefore, we assume that organizational behaviour in cross-border ecological niches revolves primarily around the administration of INTERREG programs and access to INTERREG funds. The population, thus, consists of non-binding cross-border organizations (i.e. euroregions), EGTCs, and state authorities. In this organizational environment, "rapid-but-fragile" euroregions (Perkmann, 2003) follow a strategy of *adaptation*, while "slow-but-stable" EGTCs will *compete* with state authorities for resources and competences.

Euroregions exist in great numbers and in many different organizational forms across the EU (Deas and Lord, 2006; Wassenberg, Reitel and Peyrony, 2015). From an organizational ecology perspective this is the case because entry costs are comparatively low, and because their flexible nature allows them to avoid conflicts with state authorities by adapting to new niches. Specifically, euroregions rely on non-binding memoranda of understanding and tend to cooperate in non-controversial policy fields. As such, they can provide an added value in policy fields like tourism promotion and cultural exchange without entering organizational competition with local or regional state authorities. But because their lack of 'juridical structure' does 'not always guarantee continuity' (Nadalutti, 2013: 760), state authorities are generally reluctant to delegate the administration of INTERREG programs to euroregions. Nevertheless, through the management of so-called small project funds, some euroregions act as intermediaries between program authorities and beneficiaries.

EGTCs, by contrast, are 'authorized to act directly on behalf of its members, community institutions or third parties because it represents them all equally and "speaks"

on behalf of everyone' (Nadalutti, 2013: 761). Due to this enhanced legal security, the 2014-2020 European Regional Development Fund Regulation (European Parliament and Council, 2013) stipulates that 'Member States should be encouraged to assign the functions of the managing authority to an EGTC'.

Despite this call, the Greater Region INTERREG program between Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and France, is the only one in which an EGTC acts as the managing authority (Evrard, 2016). The Greater Region EGTC is constituted of the Luxembourg Ministry for Sustainable Development and Infrastructure and the French Council of the Lorraine Region. It acts under Luxembourg law. All personnel of the joint secretary and the managing authority is employed by the EGTC (Greater Region, 2014).

When national authorities delegate the administration of an INTERREG program to an EGTC, as in the case of the Greater Region, they lose some of their ability to strike political bargains over the pre-allocation of the program funds (i.e. national envelopes) as well as their sovereign monopoly over cross-border governance. According to Nadalutti (2013:765), the possibility of 'bypassing' the state represents a direct challenge to the state's role as the 'final arbiter' of cross-border governance. Consequently, we expect that state authorities will be reluctant towards the idea delegating the administration of an INTERREG program to an EGTCs.

Moreover, organizational ecology suggests that EGTC creation is dependent on the organizational density in a specific cross-border niche. We propose that organizational density is higher in federal states and lower in unitary states. In federal states, organizational density is higher because of the existence of a regional level with an independent political agenda and a vested interest in access to INTERREG program resources and governance competence. It is, thus, perhaps not accidental that the only three federal states of the EU - Austria, Belgium, and Germany - were the last to fully

implement the EGTC regulation (Caesar, 2012: 19). In unitary states, organizational density is lower because of less politicized and/or bureaucratically consolidated regional level organizations (cf. Hooghe et al., 2016). Therefore, we expect lower EGTC creation in border regions between two federal states than in border regions between two unitary states.

We build on insights of the new institutionalism literature to expand Abbott et al.'s (2016) framework, acknowledging that the structural constraints of an ecological niche leave room for manoeuvre to actors pursuing particular agendas (Telle 2017a). In particular, we analyse whether different levels of organizational density (1) enable or inhibit different political strategies toward EGTC creation and whether these (2) influence the organizational capabilities of the created EGTCs. In unitary states, we assume that a powerful central government would be able to use EGTCs as top-down political instruments to expand its control over cross-border governance and EU structural funds. In this scenario, we expect loosely institutionalized EGTCs with low and/or state-dependent budgets, little staff, and generic mission statements. In federal states, we expect a lower probability for top-down political use of EGTCs because the political agenda of the central state is more likely to be checked by the regional level. As a result, we expect lower involvement of the state in EGTC creation, a higher probability for their bottom-up emergence and clearly specified issue areas.

To the extent that control over the INTERREG funds and cross-border governance provides a rational motivation for central governments to strategically support EGTC creation, we expect that net-contributors to and net-receivers from the EU budget pursue different objectives. We expect net-receiving member states to perceive INTERREG programs primarily as sources of additional external funds and, therefore, to prioritize funds maximization over efficient spending. By contrast, in net-contributing member

states, INTERREG funds are more likely to be understood as EU-recycled national tax revenues, resulting in a preference for efficient spending. Consequently, we anticipate that net-receiving member states are more likely to view EGTCs as a political instrument to enhance central government control over INTERREG funds. This distinction explains the low number of EGTCs among the unitary states of northern Europe, leaving France as the only case which does not fit our framework (unitary state with a high number of EGTCs, despite being a net-contributor to the EU budget).

### **3. Research design and methodology**

The article uses a comparative case study design to assess the expectations developed in the previous section. The selection of cases proceeded in two stages. First, due to the uneven distribution of EGTCs in East Central Europe, we identified the region as a ‘typical case’ (Gerring, 2007:91-97) for EGTC creation. Therefore, empirical insights from this region are representative of the wider EU-context and, thus, contribute to improving our theoretical understanding of institutional change in the EU.

Second, we narrowed the focus to Austrian and Hungarian border regions because they reflect the full variation of EGTC creation in East Central Europe. Following our theoretical framework, we ensured variation in the number of pre-existing euroregions in the border region, as to whether the involved states are unitary or federal states, and as to whether they are net-contributors to and net-receiver from the EU budget.

Comparing the number of pre-existing euroregions to the number of EGTCs at all Austrian and Hungarian EU borders (cf. Wassenberg et al., 2015: 119; Svensson, 2016: 50-51), we distinguished borders with a LOW (1-3) from borders with HIGH numbers ( $\geq 4$ ) of euroregions / EGTCs. The resulting typology of border categories (Figure 3)

suggests that a high number of pre-existing euroregions alone does not necessarily inhibit EGTC creation.

**FIGURE 3. Border Categories**

| <b>Border category</b> | <b>Euroregions</b> | <b>EGTCs</b> | <b>Total number of borders</b> |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>1</b>               | LOW                | NO           | 4                              |
| <b>2</b>               | LOW                | LOW          | 3                              |
| <b>3</b>               | HIGH               | NO           | 1                              |
| <b>4</b>               | HIGH               | HIGH         | 2                              |

We then checked whether these borders divide two federal, two unitary, or a federal as well as a unitary EU member state and whether the involved states are net-contributors or net-receivers. All four borders in category one [LOW/NO] are between net-contributing federal and net-receiving unitary states. The border in category three [HIGH/NO] is between two net-contributing federal states. The two borders in category four [HIGH/HIGH] are between two net-receiving unitary states. We excluded border category two [LOW/LOW] from the case selection because it includes two borders between two net-receiving unitary states as well as one border between a net-contributing federal and a net-contributing unitary state. Finally, we selected four ‘diverse’ cases (Gerring, 2007: 97-101) from categories one (Hungary-Austria, Slovakia-Austria), three (Austria-Germany), and four (Hungary-Slovakia).

**FIGURE 4. Selected Cases**

|                                  |                          |                         |                          |                         |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Case (Border)</b>             | Hungary<br>-<br>Slovakia | Hungary<br>-<br>Austria | Slovakia<br>-<br>Austria | Germany<br>-<br>Austria |
| <b>Number of ERs / EGTCs</b>     | HIGH-HIGH                | LOW-NO                  | LOW-NO                   | HIGH-NO                 |
| <b>Unitary (U) / Federal (F)</b> | U-U                      | U-F                     | U-F                      | F-F                     |

| <b>Receiver (R) / Contributor (C)</b> | R-R | R-C | R-C | C-C |
|---------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
|---------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|

As our theoretical framework emphasizes structural over contextual factors, we do not discuss the individual cases beyond the explanatory variables displayed in Figure 4. The limited size of the sample and of the number of explanatory variables reflect a conscious decision in favour of a parsimonious research design. Contextual factors – i.e. the state’s political strategy – are discussed in sections 5 and 6, setting limits to the generalizability of our results.

Our data sources are Partnership Agreements, INTERREG programs, and semi-structured interviews. More than 200 interviews were carried out by the authors in the four case study regions in several rounds between 2010 and 2017. For a more detailed description see (Svensson 2015, Telle 2017a, Telle 2017b). While the analysis is informed by the entire corpus of interviews, we paid particular attention to interviews with INTERREG program administrators, euroregion staff, and EGTC managers.

#### **4. European integration as a driver of organizational density**

Despite the creation of a legal framework instrument for sub-national cross-border cooperation in the Madrid Outline Convention (Council of Europe, 1980), the number of euroregions remained relatively low until the early 1990s (Svensson, 2013). However, the launch of the EU’s program for cross-border cooperation – INTERREG – in 1990 fundamentally improved the resource set of cross-border organizations, leading to a rapidly growing number of euroregions. While only thirty euroregions existed in the late 1980s, their number rose to around one hundred and fifty in 2013 (Svensson, 2013). Following organizational ecology theory, this rapid growth improved the legitimacy of

cross-border organizations as it made them ‘more widely acceptable to key audiences’ (Abbott et al. 2016: 259).

Furthermore, INTERREG established a complex institutional architecture for program management. Specifically, each INTERREG program designates a *Managing Authority* which “provides information on the programme, selects projects and monitors implementation” (European Commission, 2018) as well as a *Joint Technical Secretariat*. Hence, while INTERREG support had vastly increased organizational density in cross-border cooperation, euroregions were able to avoid organizational competition with INTERREG program authorities by adapting to specific non-controversial cross-border niches (i.e. tourism or cultural exchange).

Regarding EGTCs, however, Figure 4 has shown that the existence of a high number of euroregions is associated with low numbers of EGTCs at borders between two federal states (border category three), but not at borders between two unitary states (border category four). The following section will present evidence to suggest that this is the case because the organizational density within cross-border niches tends to be lower between two unitary states than between two federal states.

## **5. EGTC Creation in East Central Europe**

The analysis proceeds in three steps, reflecting the organizational environment at the national level and the program level, as well as contextual factors. This approach enabled us to complement the analysis of environmental conditions for EGTC creation with more contextual evidence, while maintaining their analytical distinctiveness. In this way, we hope to enhance the transparency of the analysis and the chance for a cumulative dialogue with existing and future research from other regions. Section A analyses the

organizational environment for EGTC creation at national level by comparing four 2014-2020 Partnership Agreements. Partnership Agreements are concluded between the European Commission and member states at the beginning of each multi-annual funding period. They establish a framework to determine how member states can spend the allocated structural funds and, thus, constitute the key reference for designing the individual INTERREG programs. Section B zooms in on the four case regions and compares the respective INTERREG programs of the 2007-2013 and the 2014-2020 programming periods. Section C makes use of interviews with actors in these regions to flesh out the structural analysis with attitudinal data.

*a. Organizational environment at the national level*

In analysing the Partnership Agreements between the European Commission and Slovakia, Hungary, Germany, and Austria, we gathered evidence about the general stance of these respective member states towards EGTCs. A clear division emerges between the federal net-contributing member states (Austria and Germany) and the unitary net-receiving member states (Hungary and Slovakia).

Regarding the first group, the Austrian Partnership Agreement does not refer to EGTCs. Similarly, the German Partnership Agreement merely states that no EGTC with seat in Germany exists and that “where an EGTC was planned, the preparations were extraordinarily laborious and have not yet succeeded” (p. 225). The German Partnership Agreement continues to explain that ‘forms of cooperation’ should be chosen according to the criteria of efficiency and subsidiarity.

These remarks confirm our theoretical expectations to some extent in that federal states experience greater organizational competition and in that efficient spending trumps fund maximization in net-contributing member states. However, three EGTCs with seat

in Germany were eventually created after the conclusion of the Partnership Agreement (European Committee of the Regions 2017). They are located outside the analysed case regions and only the Grande Region EGTC involves another federal member state, Belgium.

Regarding the second group, the existing Slovak EGTCs were consulted in the process of drawing up the Slovak Partnership Agreement (p. 112) and are expected to create synergies between the Central Europe Transnational Program and the Danube Macro-Regional Strategy (p. 284). Furthermore, the Partnership Agreement states that ‘[w]ithin the framework of territorial cooperation, support will continue to be provided to the EGTC with the aim to facilitate the preparation of joint strategic and programming documents of territorial cooperation’ (p. 286).

The final version of the Hungarian Partnership Agreement does not refer to EGTCs. However, an earlier draft version from July 2, 2013 envisions a very ambitious role for the EGTCs as cross-border Integrated Territorial Investment instruments:

According to Hungary’s position, the application of integrated territorial investment (ITI) instruments should be possible in the cross-border programmes of ETC. In the ETC programmes the integrated territorial investments are implemented by the European Groupings of Territorial Co-operation. (p. 183)

While the exclusion of this section from the Partnership Agreement seems to indicate ‘the difficulties caused by the necessary multi-level and multi-lateral negotiations’ (Ocskay, 2016: 39), it is indicative of the central government’s objective to gain control over cross-border investments through EGTCs. This intention is also reflected in the fact that the final Partnership Agreement refers to governmental decree 1441/2013 to ensure that ‘institution building’ is one of five state-determined development priorities which apply to all Hungarian INTERREG programs

Briefly after the final Partnership Agreement was published in August 2014, Hungary adopted significantly amended EGTC legislation following the amended EU EGTC regulation of December 2013. Norbert Jankai (2016: 13, 16-18, 20-26) suggested that the changes leading to the new Hungarian legislation were more substantial than in most other member states, particularly regarding the *centralization* of EGTC administration under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (responsible for approval, registration, supervision control, and dissolution of all Hungarian EGTCs). Situating this development in the general ‘transformation of the administrative system in Hungary’ after the 2010 elections, Jankai concludes that

from the perspective of cross-border cooperation, it is not fortunate that certain county institutions were nationalised, because it is in this way that the possibility to establish certain thematic EGTCs (without including the state) – which would have relied on the more efficient utilisation of the concerned counties’ institutions – has ceased. (p. 23)

In 2016 a new government decree was under preparation ‘which would give EGTCs a coordinator status in cross-border economic developments on the Hungarian side’ (Ocskay, 2016: 33). Thus, while the centralization of EGTC-related procedures restricts their capacity to act autonomously and generate cross-border synergies, their prospective role as economic coordinators seems to suggest that they are used as political instruments of the central government. These findings confirm the argument that Hungary is typical for East Central Europe in that Europeanization drives the centralization of intergovernmental relations (Brusis, 2002) and that the central authorities remain reluctant to let regional authorities set priorities (Dąbrowski, 2014).

In sum, the two country groups exhibit different attitudes towards EGTCs. The two net-contributing federal states either do not mention EGTCs at all or point to the bureaucratic difficulties involved in the establishment EGTCs which fulfil the requirements of

efficiency and subsidiarity. These observations suggest the greater number of actors in federal systems creates barriers to EGTC creation. The two net-receiving unitary states, by contrast, promote EGTC creation. However, in the case of Slovakia their objectives are only vaguely defined as “creating synergies” and in the case of Hungary, EGTCs appear to be utilized as centrally-controlled governance tool instruments. This suggests that considerations of efficiency play a marginal role.

***b. Organizational environment at the program level***

This section zooms in on the organizational environment in the four case study regions. We compare the four respective INTERREG programs across the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programming periods to incorporate change over time. The central contention is that support for EGTC creation is lower in border regions where regional-level state authorities function as INTERREG Managing Authorities (grey shading in Figure 5.)

**FIGURE 5.** *Locations of INTERREG Managing Authorities*

| <b>Period</b>    | <b>AT-BA</b>           | <b>AT-HU</b>                              | <b>AT-SK</b>  | <b>HU-SK</b>                                    |
|------------------|------------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>2007-2013</b> | State of Upper Austria | State-owned development agency Burgenland | State of Vienna                                       | Prime Minister’s Office                         |
| <b>2014-2020</b> | State of Upper Austria | State-owned development agency Burgenland | Slovak Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development | Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade |

The 2007-2013 *Austrian-Bavarian* program (p. 11) contains one mentioning of the 2006 EGTC regulation and the 2014-2020 program does not refer to EGTCs at all. By contrast, both programs repeatedly refer to euroregions as important facilitators of cross-border cooperation. The 2007-2013 document highlights that

the euroregions have established themselves in the region as important partners with regard to implementing the [INTERREG] program, to project development and support, and to public relations activities. [...] The euroregions have become indispensable platforms for cross-border cooperation. (p. 54)

The 2007-2013 *Austrian-Hungarian* program does not refer to EGTCs either, but the 2014-2020 program mentions them with regard to improving ‘regional governance and institutional cooperation’ (p. 18-19) and as potential beneficiaries (p. 100). Despite this, no EGTCs exist in the program area. Similarly, the 2007-2013 *Austrian-Slovak* program refers to the 2006 EGTC regulation (p. 8) and mentions EGTC creation as an output indicator (p. 68, 70 and 71). The corresponding 2014-2020 program lists EGTCs as potential beneficiaries (p. 51 and 70). Again, no EGTCs exist in the program area. Furthermore, references to euroregions in the *Austrian-Hungarian* or the *Austrian-Slovak* program in either of the two periods are marginal.

The analysis of the two *Hungarian-Slovak* programs shows how changes in national political systems can affect the role of EGTCs. In the 2007-2013 program, EGTCs are listed as potential beneficiaries (pp. 56 and 63) and 17 Hungarian cross-border EGTCs were created in that period (Committee of the Regions 2017), suggesting a focus on funds-absorption. In the 2014-2020 program, EGTCs play a much more strategic role. A long section of the program is dedicated to summarizing their activities. EGTCs are presented as a response to the ‘need for a more strategic integrated joint use of urban functions and territorial capital in the borderland’ (p. 9). Correspondingly, the development of EGTC cross-border territorial development strategies, the growing number of employees, the high gross annual expenses, and the large service portfolios are listed as indicators of their success. Annex 1 of the program includes a map of all Hungarian-Slovak EGTCs as well as a table with their characteristics. Additionally (p. 29), EGTC development strategies are mentioned as ‘guiding principles’ for the operation

of the program. The program stipulates the creation of a small project fund managed by EGTCs. With regard to the program design process, it is stated that the EGTCs were

interviewed, invited to the workshops (some of them also gave presentations) and the meetings of the Task Force. Similarly, to other stakeholders, EGTCs were permanently informed on the shaping of the CP [Cohesion Policy] both via email and personally at the EGTC workshops organized quarterly by CESCO [Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives] (p. 94)

In fact, the final program of September 2016 gives additional space and importance to EGTCs when compared to an earlier version of January 2014. The timing suggests that this might be a compensation for the failure of including EGTCs in central functions in the final Partnership Agreement (see section 5a).

The quote also highlights the important role which the Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives (CESCI) plays in promoting the interests of EGTCs. CESCO was created in 2009 ‘think-and-do-tank’ (Ocskay, 2016: 33) by a group of people from public administration, civil society and academia with experience of cross-border cooperation in the region, mainly from Hungary but also from surrounding countries. Based in Budapest, CESCO advocates for increased cross-border cooperation and offers consultancy services, for instance to those involved in establishing or running EGTCs. It is modelled on, and received support from, a similar French organization, Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière, and its secretary generals and affiliates frequently meet up, both at their own events and at various forums in Brussels. The importance of these organizations is underlined by the fact that France and Hungary have the highest number of EGTCs of all EU member states. This suggests that in the absence of strong regional-level opposition, the overlapping interests of CESCO and the Hungarian central government facilitate EGTC creation. While they may not hold identical normative ideas

about the role of EGTC in cross-border governance, their endorsement expands the niche in which EGTCs operate.

The argument that the Hungarian central government utilizes EGTCs as political tools finds additional support in the repeated re-definition of their functions. While many Hungarian EGTCs have started out as potential beneficiaries and ‘instruments to support the Hungarian minorities abroad’ (Ocskay, 2016: 28; also Svensson 2018), after the 2010 election, they ‘gained a rather cross-border governance role’ (p. 29). Subsequently, their economic function became more important (p. 32) and they may yet gain ‘coordinator status in cross-border economic developments on the Hungarian side’ (p. 33). In addition, since 2011 a governmental fund for the support of EGTCs contributes to a numerical growth of EGTCs across Hungary (Ocskay, 2016: 30). The importance of this fund was confirmed by a survey one of the authors conducted with managers and directors: ‘Except for the financial support from the Ministry [the EGTC fund], the legal form of EGTC does not lead to other development support.’ (EGTC Manager 2015). Still, local government actors and EGTC managers perceive their capacity to shape national policy as limited and the survey recorded few efforts to directly influence policies. However, one respondent stated that for “national and European level institutions, the connections are done via CESCO” (EGTC Manager 2015). This suggests that Hungarian EGTCs perceive CESCO as a hub for information about funding opportunities and as a mechanism to communicate their interests.

The comparison of the four INTERREG programs confirms the findings of the previous section and allows a more differentiated view. The fact that EGTCs are not mentioned at all in the Austrian-Bavarian program, while euroregions are presented as ‘indispensable platforms for cross-border cooperation’ corresponds to the expectations of organizational ecology: the “rapid-but-fragile” euroregions were able to adapt to an

intermediary role as a service provider between program authorities and beneficiaries; or merely act as beneficiaries. Thus, the cost for avoiding organizational competition with the regional-level INTERREG program authorities was the marginalization of the bottom-up strategic-planning role of the euroregion format. The absence of EGTCs from the program document might be interpreted as a strategy by the regional-level state authorities to avoid organizational competition around the management of the INTERREG program. Likewise, the absence of EGTCs at the Austrian-Slovak and Austrian-Hungarian borders, despite their mentioning in the respective programs, can be attributed to the resistance of Austrian regional-level state authorities. This is corroborated by the comparison of the Austrian-Slovak and the Hungarian-Slovak program. The different numbers of EGTCs at these borders can be explained by favourable conditions in Hungary (low organisational density permits a powerful central government to implement its “centralizing” political agenda) and unfavourable conditions in Austria (high organizational density and scepticism toward the added value of new organizational arrangements at regional level). The next section illustrates to what extent these structural conditions leave room for agency and contextual factors to shape EGTC creation.

***c. Contextualization: Attitudes towards EGTCs creation***

In a survey conducted at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Managing Authorities of the European Territorial Cooperation programs, 67% of the respondents were sceptical of the added value of EGTCs. In fact, 31% of the respondents identified ‘no need whatsoever’ for EGTCs. This is despite the recognition, by 78% of the respondents, that a greater focus on ‘cooperation needs, not national envelopes’ was needed (European Commission, 2014). Considering that the overwhelming majority of EU member states are unitary

states, this section explores whether scepticism towards EGTCs is a feature of Managing Authorities in unitary *and* federal states in our four case study regions. It presents evidence from interviews with INTERREG Managing Authorities and Joint Technical Secretariats (multiple rounds between 2010 and 2017) as well as a survey with EGTC managers and directors (two rounds in 2015 and 2016). A comparison of the Austrian-Slovak and the Austrian-Bavarian borders is contrasted with a comparison of the Hungarian-Slovak and the Hungarian-Austrian borders.

Neither the Austrian-Slovak nor the Austrian-Bavarian borders currently has an EGTC, but both have toyed with the idea. Concerning the Austrian-Slovak border, the CENTROPE initiative was launched in the early 2000s to promote cross-border cooperation at the regional level. Plans existed to turn the initiative into an EGTC. However, after two major EU-funded capacity building projects, the participating regions could not agree on a funding strategy for the administration of CENTROPE. Interestingly, the objectives of CENTROPE remained unclear even after the capacity building projects were concluded, as a member of the 2007-2013 Managing Authority highlighted:

Ultimately the question is [...] what is the objective of Centrope? What is the substance of the cooperation and what are the common interests? Given the [national] structure of administration and competences, there is just no perspective that [the Centrope initiative] will develop some kind of European competence. So, what is it essentially? Is it a marketing instrument? Is it an umbrella brand for different cultural activities? Is it a shared tourism space? Is it an economic space? Is it about clusters? Is it about the labor market? Is it about shared standards with regard to the vocational training of mechatronics?

In this context, the experiences made with the CENTROPE initiative (as well as with the failure of the only euroregion at the Austrian-Slovak border) appear to have led to a more reluctant approach to cross-border organizations in Austria. A variety of Austrian interview partners used the phrase ‘expensive money’ to underline that EU funds need to

be spent efficiently and accountably. The Austrian INTERREG Managing Authorities are staffed with bureaucrats accountable to the federal states.

This point is reinforced by the fact that many formerly independent Austrian euroregion sections were incorporated into state-owned regional development agencies after 2000. Equally, the independence of euroregions at the Austrian-Bavarian border has been reduced in the 2014-2020 programming period in an Austrian effort to reduce the discretionary power of intermediary cross-border structures. Moreover, according to one member of the Austrian-Bavarian Managing Authority, the current program prioritizes research and development projects, which ‘definitively harms the structure of the euroregions, because such projects rarely rely on communal networks’.

Despite this tendency, there are efforts at the Austrian-Bavarian border to transform the regional-level Euroregion Danube-Vltava into an EGTC. This objective is closely linked to the expectation that EGTCs will get preferential access to European Territorial Cooperation funds in the upcoming 2021-2028 funding period. Still, the added value of the Euroregion Danube-Vltava is viewed critically by local Managing Authorities, as the following quotation shows:

honestly speaking, that is a design fault of the EU. They want this Euroregion Danube-Vltava, but they never made dedicated funds available for it. As a result, they always need to poach other support programs. [...] In my opinion, the EU has not solved this in a smart way. If you wanted to support this Euroregion, you would have had to create dedicated programs and say: Now there is a program to support the Euroregion Danube-Vltava. (MA Bavaria-Czech Republic)

Like CENTROPE, the Euroregion Danube-Vltava benefitted from several EU-funded capacity building projects. Unlike CENTROPE, it has succeeded in securing a sustainable financial commitment from the participating regions.

In sum, our data indicates that earlier discouraging experiences with cross-border institutions as well as the involvement of strong regional-level state authorities in the INTERREG program management contribute to a reluctance towards EGTCs in Austria. The example of the Euroregion Danube-Vltava suggests that uncertainties about the future modalities of accessing EU funds – besides substantive objectives – are a crucial driver of EGTC creation.

By contrast, the Hungarian-Slovak border has one of the highest densities of EGTCs in the EU. Many of these EGTCs, like the Ister-Granum EGTC, were among the first to be created (Balogh and Pete, 2017). In a Hungarian comparative study of all Hungarian EGTCs (Törzsök and Majoros, 2015), Ister-Granum was ranked second highest in terms of institutional development. In international comparative studies, the Hungarian-Slovak EGTCs do not perform equally well. For example, Scott (2017: 8) has argued that they are ‘less successful cases’ which ‘have often merely served to enhance local budgets without stimulating true cooperation’. This evaluation resonates with the creation of the two EGTC small project funds as well as with the existence of the Hungarian governmental EGTC fund. It also echoes Engl's (2016: 164) taxonomy of European EGTCs in which the Ister-Granum EGTC is ranked in the lowest category due to restricted institutional participation and lack of resources.

A similarly contradictory picture emerged from our data. While the EGTCs were involved in the INTERREG program design, the program authorities were generally sceptical about their added value. Regarding their involvement in the 2014-2020 INTERREG program design process, an EGTC manager stated:

In the preparatory work for the HU-SK program, there were several occasions at which we could give opinions and suggestions. The preparatory group regularly submitted information, and there were quarterly information and consultation meetings arranged for the EGTCs.

Regarding the impact of their involvement, one EGTC manager clarified that ‘those who wrote the program invited us to all meetings, and they also took our opinions into account in the program since they accepted our proposal for a Small Project Fund.’ (EGTC Manager Hungary-Slovakia). In fact, the creation of a small projects fund is an important success for the EGTCs as it allows them to act as intermediaries with considerable discretionary power in the allocation of the program funds.

This dynamic contrasts with the reduced discretionary power of the Austrian-Bavarian euroregions and will potentially increase the impact these EGTCs will have at the Hungarian-Slovak border. However, the chair of one EGTC stated that ‘we could not achieve that they involved the EGTCs directly in [territorial] planning’ (EGTC Chair Hungary-Slovakia). In this regard, several survey respondents emphasized that they would ultimately like to get access to policy formation, decision-making and implementation of the mainstream EU programs with a higher monetary value.

The Joint Technical Secretariat of the 2007-2013 Hungarian-Slovak program stated that ‘euroregions as such are not a partner/client for us. We are dealing with authorities, although the new European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation might change this’. Subsequently, many of the existing Hungarian-Slovak euroregions were, in fact, transformed into EGTCs and new EGTCs were created, too. This led to a situation in the 2014-2020 programming period in which the same Joint Technical Secretariat questioned the capacity of EGTCs to run project calls in an accountable way:

It is my private opinion that there is not really any strategy in setting up such a huge number [of EGTCs] It is my opinion that they are not prepared [to run project calls]. They do not have the capacity. Many projects are very complex. There will be a mixture of first-level-control between these EGTCs and JTS.

A completely different picture emerges at the Hungarian-Austrian border, which neither has functioning euroregions nor EGTCs. In 2009, a respondent from the Joint Technical Secretariat of the 2007-2013 program commented on this situation:

There is no real active Euroregion in the area. The West Pannon Euroregion supposedly should cover it, but it has 'sort of died'. [...] Euroregions are toothless tigers, which are only good for strategic development. [...] EGTC has not been a topic in the last years.

As such, euroregions and EGTCs were seen here as having a very limited potential added value for cross-border governance, as there is a belief that the INTERREG program bodies can deliver sufficient consultation for potential beneficiaries. The Joint Technical Secretariat still expressed very similar thoughts in the 2014-2020 programming period:

They [EGTCs] are not considered necessary. Because the projects only need partners. And nobody has any idea of what they should do. I don't know. I don't have a clue what that could be. [...] For me it would only make sense in the order that there is first a demand, a content, and that you look for a suitable organizational structure on top of that, instead of let's start with the organization, just have the EGTC.

Scepticism towards EGTCs, thus, exists both in the Hungarian-Slovak as well as in the Hungarian-Austrian Joint Technical Secretariat. Nevertheless, the former border has 15 EGTCs, the latter has none. We argue that this suggests a strong political preference for EGTC creation on part of the Hungarian central government. In the case of the Hungarian-Slovak program, the location of the Managing Authority (see Figure 5) enabled the Hungarian central government to imprint this preference upon INTERREG program in both programming periods. In the case of the Hungarian-Austrian program, the interests of the Hungarian central government were trumped by those of the much more sceptical regional-level authorities in Austria.

## 6. Conclusion

This article departed from the observation that the number of EGTCs varies widely between different borders across the EU. In East Central Europe, EGTC creation was particularly rapid and uneven after 2006. The article pursued the objective of explaining this variation by focusing on the structural condition of EGTC creation. To this end it adopted an organizational ecology perspective, suggesting that the organizational density within ecological niches defines patterns of institutional change.

We then argued that European integration, especially the INTERREG programs, have crucially contributed to the growing number of cross-border organizations. In this constellation, we explained the quick multiplication of “rapid-but-fragile” euroregions after 1989 by their voluntary and flexible nature. This enabled them to access EU funds while avoiding direct competition with INTERREG program authorities. By contrast, EGTCs confer a common legal personality to cross-border organizations, which makes cooperation more binding.

In consequence, the EU encouraged member states to entrust the management of INTERREG programs in the 2014-2020 programming period to EGTCs. We expected that the state authorities involved in INTERREG program management would generally ignore this call because of their vested interest in INTERREG resources and cross-border governance competences.

Building on organizational ecology, we proposed that the existence of a strong regional level generates higher organizational density and lower EGTC creation in federal states as compared to unitary states. We argued that this is the case because in federal states, regional-level state authorities act as INTERREG Managing Authorities. As such, they have an interest to protect their own involvement in INTERREG programs, irrespective of the position of the central government. Consequentially, we expected that

EGTCs in federal states would largely be confined to issue-specific bottom-up initiatives. In unitary states, INTERREG program management lies within the purview of the central government. In the absence of strong regional-level authorities, this makes the top-down creation of EGTCs more likely.

We compared four border areas to scrutinize these expectations: one between two federal states, one between two unitary states, and two between a federal and a unitary state. At the national level, the analysis of four Partnership Agreements confirmed the expected differences between federal and unitary states. In addition, the analysis of INTERREG programs showed that references to EGTCs are marginal in all but the Hungarian-Slovak program (two unitary states) and that the Hungarian central government appears to use EGTCs as political instruments. Finally, the analysis of interview and survey data showed that INTERREG program authorities indeed view EGTCs sceptically in all four cases and that the deciding factor for EGTC creation is, indeed, the ability (low organizational density) and the willingness (political motivation) to increase control over INTERREG funds and cross-border governance. This evidence supports the notion that lower organizational density in unitary states enables central governments to pursue a political strategy of top-down EGTC creation.

The fact that no EGTCs exist between the federal states under analysis, confirms our expectations but prevents us from evaluating whether such EGTCs would, indeed, be issue-specific bottom-up developments. The high number, but low organizational capabilities, of the Hungarian-Slovak EGTCs are explained by three factors: First, regional level authorities have little autonomy and influence over central government and are not centrally involved in INTERREG program management. Second, overlapping organizational agendas between the central state and the influential think tank CESC broadened the ecological niche (resources and competences) for EGTCs. Third,

INTERREG authorities view EGTCs with scepticism. As a result, EGTCs in the Hungarian-Slovak border region rapidly expanded in a state-supported niche without challenging the already existing INTERREG program or state authorities.

We found that neither federal nor unitary states in the case regions are actively promoting the use of EGTCs as INTERREG Managing Authorities. To achieve this objective after 2020, we believe further supranational incentives are appropriate. For instance, making EGTC program management a pre-condition for INTERREG funds.

Finally, regarding future research we suggest to further explore the complementarity between the organizational ecology approach and more agency-centred theories. On our part, we used insights from the new institutionalism literature to accommodate agency and contextual factors within ecological niches. It would be interesting to see whether different levels of organizational density influence actor behaviour in specific ways. We furthermore believe that organizational ecology shows significant overlaps with multi-level governance theory (Marks and Hooghe, 2004) and with recent theories of state rescaling (cf. Allmendinger et al., 2014; Allmendinger et al., 2015; Haughton et al., 2010). Their exploration could lead to the development of a more nuanced typology of organizational formats and help to better understand the drivers of organizational diversification. It could also produce new knowledge about the effects of diversification on the content of cross-border cooperation. For instance, whether euroregions transforming into EGTCs change their focus and whether organizations choosing to remain euroregions have to compete with newly founded EGTCs in specific policy fields. Empirically, future research may explore whether our results can be reproduced in other European border regions and expand the analysis to include devolved or strongly regionalized unitary states.

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