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Investigating regional identities within the pan-Alpine governance system: The presence or absence of identification with a “community of problems” among local political actors

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ABSTRACT

The creation in the Alps of networks of local political actors can be considered one of the most successful attempts to regionalize issues at a mountain-range level. This regionalization process began with the signing of the Alpine Convention in 1991 by the eight Alpine countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia and Switzerland), as well as the EU. Pan-alpine networks of political actors are emblematically identified as the “ambassadors of the Alpine Convention” (Götz and Rohrer, 2011). But why did local actors choose to adhere to these networks that emerged in the Alps in the 1990s? Could this new way of connecting people and ideas beyond national borders result from a solid Alpine identity and a strong adherence to the principles entailed in the Alpine Convention? Evidence from field work shows that some municipalities chose to seek solutions for issues within the Alpine perimeter and to actively promote sustainable development via adherence to pan-Alpine networks of local actors that aim to solve local problems. Nevertheless, this is not the only possible strategy for local problem solving, nor does this approach necessarily lead to strong identification among municipalities within this perimeter. Based on an examination of three municipalities in the Alps, this article demonstrates that identities are a matter of choice and that a municipality’s geographical position does not pre-determine a particular political or social identity. Identities evolve over time and are pluralistic and Alpine examples indeed show that socio-political actors have multi-layered identities. Pan-Alpine networks contribute to the emergence of a transnational governance system through the identification of certain local political actors with the “Alpine community of problems” transcending national boundaries.

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1. Introduction

The Alpine region is considered a model for other mountain regions facing similar problems inside and outside Europe

(Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2010: 316; Siegrist, 2011: 3) even though it was only recognized as a formal region in 1991 with the signature of the Alpine Convention.

The pan-Alpine region-building process is the result of what can be called a “top-down initiative” (Del Biaggio, 2010:

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138–139), though this is accompanied by other initiatives that are local in nature. A variety of transnational networks were initiated in the Alps that link together different actors such as businesses, municipalities, protected areas, cities, ski resorts and so on. This results in the emergence of a complex governance system at the Alpine scale where state and non-state actors both play important roles. The involvement of numerous institutions in pan-Alpine issues detached from national narratives is clear, but the question remains open on *why* and *how* people and collectives get involved (or not) in pan-Alpine networks.

In this paper, I investigate reasons for the involvement of members of Alliance in the Alps, one of many networks created in the Alps as of the 1990s. This network connects Alpine municipalities willing to implement sustainable development.

The article is organized as follows. First, I propose an overview of the Alpine Convention and of pan-Alpine networks, with special reference to Alliance in the Alps. Second, I conceptualize “regional identities”, explaining their social as well as their geographical sense. After a short methodological note, I present the functions and dimensions of networking and to highlight my main point I use examples from two of the most active municipalities in the Alliance in the Alps, Mäder, Austria and Budoia, Italy. I then discuss a counterexample from a Swiss Alpine municipality that had been in touch with Alliance in the Alps but decided not to become a member. Finally, I analyze the significance of belonging to a “community of problems,” which is one of the main reasons why local political actors identify with the pan-Alpine region and get involved in it.

2. The Alpine Convention and the networks within it: an overview

2.1. The Alpine Convention

The Alpine mountain range started to be used as a pertinent scale for promoting sustainable development projects as of the 1990s, following the signature of the Alpine Convention by the eight Alpine states and the European Union in 1991. This Convention has been considered the first international treaty seeking to coordinate a variety of public policies at the mountain massif scale and is cited as a model of ecoregional governance inside and outside Europe (Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2010; Siegrist, 2011: 3; Balsiger and Van Deveer, 2010).

Despite this success on one level, the Convention was criticized for being just a “piece of paper” with no accompanying implementation plans (Simonis, 1997: 13; Balsiger, 2008: 5). Networks of local political actors have been created to overcome this problem and to put into practice what the framework of the Convention promised, sustainable development in the Alpine region. These networks include municipalities, cities, ski resorts, protected areas, firms and other actors, all of whom have become the builders of the region.

These networks frame their activities within the Alpine Convention’s geographic area, which comprises territories within eight countries and about 6200 municipalities (Fig. 1).

2.2. Focus on one pan-Alpine network: alliance in the Alps

These networks used the opportunity offered them by European Union Regional Policy funds in order to carry out projects aimed at the implementation of the Alpine Convention’s principles. They promote sustainable development and a horizontal *modus operandi* and are one of the *tesserae* of the Alpine mosaic, made up of an increasing number of actors and levels of action that are building a complex system of governance (Debarbieux, 2008: 48). Leitner conceptualizes how new types of horizontal cooperation, no longer linked to inherited territorial units, are drawing new geographies: “Transnational networks represent new modes of coordination and governance, a new politics of horizontal relations that have a distinct spatiality” (Leitner in Marston et al., 2005: 417). For the networks under analysis here, the Alpine Convention defines this “distinctive spatiality”.

Alliance in the Alps is the oldest of these networks, established in 1997 under the aegis of the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps (CIPRA). It was created as an instrument for putting the principles of the Convention into practice at the local level. Indeed, people working for CIPRA determined that municipal-level projects were the most relevant in order to give concrete meaning to the Alpine Convention. The idea of creating a network of local authorities goes back to the beginning of the 1990s when a small group of pan-Alpine activists reflected on how to implement the Alpine Convention that was then experiencing difficulties in achieving acceptance at local levels (Petite, 2009: 312). They came up with the idea of crossing the Alps on foot in order to discuss the Convention with locals. The TransAL-Pedes project was born. Stemming from this effort, this network of municipalities was established. It currently includes over 300 local authorities from the eight Alpine countries.

The network includes an executive board composed of seven local representatives from the Alpine states. A secretary and three project managers work for Alliance in the Alps in the same building as CIPRA International in Liechtenstein. Membership fees fund this international association, while EU programs or private foundations fund individual projects. To become members of the network, municipalities must submit a project in the field of sustainable development and pay an annual fee, proportional to the number of inhabitants. Moreover, the membership application must be justified by concrete environmentally friendly projects.

3. Territorialized identities: resources for regional action

“Identity” is criticized for being “indefinable” (Bray, 2002: 14) or at least “ambiguous” (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 2). It is therefore important to explain why the “identity catchword” (Häkli, 2001: 115) is employed here to refer to a territorialized entity, in order to give it a consistent meaning. Identity is used here to describe how local political actors identify with a given territory, i.e. the pan-Alpine region.

Contemporary understanding of identity emerged in the 1980s with the interpretation that identity is plural and

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