

In Search of Emerging Polities: Thematic Agendas of Selected European Cross-Border Cooperation Structures

Valentin Cojanu, Alexandru Gavriș, Raluca Robu¹

Abstract: *The objective of this paper² is to find several answers by investigating the extent to which the cross-border cooperation structures (CBCS) act as de facto emerging polities. The scope of research is limited to the layer of territorial cooperation, namely the policy space or more exactly the thematic agendas of a sample of selected CBCS: Council of the Baltic Sea States, Greater Region, and Nordic Council, Oresund Region (OR) and South Eastern European Region (SEER). We design a methodological approach based on a content analysis of public documents or papers specific to each area. For two of the selected regions – Baltic and Oresund – the results support the working hypothesis that a converging approach towards issues of common concern may be a condition for deeper regional integration and, more specifically, for the viability of emerging polities. This research, however, did not look farther than the policy space that is relevant for the territorial integration of markets, leaving aside the economic and the socio-cultural spaces, for which different conceptual frameworks and methodologies are needed.*

Keywords: *European integration, territory, regional development, polity*

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1. Introduction

The increase of cross-border cooperation (CBC) has become an established feature of the European economic space. From small to large-scale initiatives, CBC structures

¹ **Valentin Cojanu** is a Professor of International Economics and Business at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (Romania). His research interests aim at integrating the various strands of social thought into economics in themes exploring international development and the logic of social study. E-mail: cojanu@ase.ro.

Alexandru Gavriș is a Lecturer at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. A member of Department of Tourism and Geography, he is interested in methodologies that allow him to gain insights into the city of Bucharest. His secondary interests cover the integration of geographical approach into economic mainstream and, through this, the understanding of space as power holder. E-mail: alexandru.gavris@rei.ase.ro.

Raluca Robu is an Associate Teaching Assistant at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, in the Department of International Business and Economics and a Ph.D. graduate of the same faculty. E-mail: ralucageorgianarobu@gmail.com.

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encompass around 41% of the European Union's (EU) total inhabitants and 60% of its territory (Medeiros 2015) and benefit from most of the allocated funds for the European Territorial Cooperation objective, with ca. 6 billion Euros spent over 6,000 projects in the previous (2007-2013) programming period (Deffaa 2014). The overwhelming evidence (see also AEBR 2012, p. 1) lends itself to some obvious questions: How much will CBC change the impact of national economic policies? Will it strengthen or weaken the role of the nation-state? The pace of accomplishing the EU single market, will it accelerate as a result? It is the objective of this paper to arrive at several answers by investigating the extent to which the CBC participating countries or regions act as *de facto* emerging polities.

The origins of statehood may have been grounded in basic catalysts of sovereignty like language and ethnicity, but the rise of the modern nation-state, as Wallerstein's (2011) investigation shows, has been possible by distilling (read: defending, regulating, and politicizing) more sophisticated components of a society's socio-political fabric like citizenship, race, or class. If one is to search at present for emerging polities in territories that get rid of instead of erecting division marks poses similar challenges. For one thing, the sovereign region is a product ideally consisting of a perfect match between its functional (operational) and administrative (political) functions in the same geographical area (Edwards 2007, p. 4). For another, to assess the optimal nature of this working, one has to have an in-depth look at the conditions of its viability as a separate unit of analysis. The existing studies point to three distinct yet co-existing layers of integration forces.

First, a policy space revolves around converging themes of common concern. The political objective is hardly changeable with any newly forming polity – e.g. the welfare improvement of its people – only the means to achieve it get modelled around the new rationale of administrative organisation at territorial level. The focus on regional issues asserts precedence over the national-level for local decision-makers and communities (Cnossen, 2003; VanNijnatten and Boychuk 2004), and gradually reshape the meaning of the classical determinants of belonging, identity and citizenship (Nadalutti 2014).

Second, an economic space forms around a single market able to support competitive advance and bring prosperity to its constituents. The 'Go global' credo may continue to play an important role in business internationalization and in making most of the advantages of global competition; success stories – Switzerland, The Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Singapore to name just a few – serve as a permanent reminder about the vital role of external markets in fostering prosperity back home. However, from Linder (1961) to Porter (1990) to contemporary research on clusters and value chains, theorists have warned that all economic success stories are ultimately based on nurturing a competitive 'domestic' market where the economic actors learn how to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. Local conditions of competitiveness such as immobile factors (e.g. territorial capital, tacit knowledge), taxation or lock-in attributes of specialization belong to an economic space that does not necessarily resemble the geographical contour of national-states any longer.

Third, a socio-cultural space based on shared customs and histories, social values, and work habits will continue to be a powerful force in defining a community. Intra-regional

differences in what are now standard administrative units like federal or nation-states may not be a result of poorly designed macroeconomic policy but inadequate consideration of regional communalities. So, asynchronous business cycles within an economic space may reflect divergent economic and developmental needs that claim a better focus on understanding a community's priorities rather than targeting variables within the existing state boundaries.

Together, the political, economic, and socio-cultural constraints are helpful in delineating the geographical contour of an emerging polity large enough to address the aspirations of people identifying themselves with a community, and not so small as to stop taking advantage of the benefits of scale and controlling for negative externalities. There is a respectable scholarly tradition of rethinking economic spaces beyond the nation-state's geographical confines, at either sub- or supra-national level. Fictive polities have been imagined for long (Garreau 1981, Heineken 1992), but real ones have actually taken shape in time to resemble true jurisdictions. In formal arrangements, more or less binding, they have mushroomed and flag exotic names not only in the hinterland of older democracies, like Cascadia (Dupeyron 2008; CascadiaNow 2014) in North America or Upper Adriatic (Nadalutti 2014) in the EU core, but also all over the world (Chen, 2005).

From all possible samples of study, this paper looks at Cross-border cooperation structures (CBCS) as prime candidates to offer lessons on emerging polities. They feature fittingly rich institutional diversity as they:

- May or may not hold legal personality in representing the interests of the respective region and are founded to manage cooperation projects of the members of an EU cross-border region (AEBR, 2008);
- Have limited authority in relation to national states, according to the form of organization: association, charter, intergovernmental commission, European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), etc. (ESPON, 2010);
- Are very different in terms of size, autonomy, institutional level and specialization, involve a variety of public and private actors, and face the "challenge of being divided across two or more sovereign nations, with different governance systems and different strategies" (Anderson, 2012).

The scope of research is limited to the layer of territorial cooperation that comes first in our list of integration forces above, namely the policy space or more exactly the thematic agendas of the CBCS members. The paper continues with a section dedicated to the context in which, before acceding to full-fledged self-determination, there is a certain parallelism and coordination between the policies of the members with the role of supporting initiatives of cooperation in different domains. The networks and linkages that form within a territory can produce spill-overs and enhance economic competitiveness in varying degrees depending on the extent of overlap between the functional and administrative roles of the emerging polity. We design a methodological approach based on content analysis of public documents or papers specific to a selected sample of CBCS to test the working hypothesis that a converging approach towards issues of common concern may be a condition for deeper regional integration and more specifically for the

viability of the emerging polities. Conclusions point to some considerations on the effect of the emergence of new cross-border cooperation structures and the role of the nation-state when trans-boundary governance extends its prerogatives.

2. From nation-state to region to polity: theoretical background

Region and *regional policy* have secured a place in a nation-state's development strategy at least since the UK in the 1920s and the US in the 1930s pioneered public interventions to redress regional imbalances. The perspective on *regional* issues has changed considerably in the meantime. From experiences with large scale projects of market integration, as for example on the European and North-American continents, it has been observed (Brunet-Jailly 2012, Schoon 2013) that a circular process whereby economic integration reinforces institutional integration and vice-versa foments various scales of territorial integration in a way that the *region* plays an evolutionary role in the transition from nation-state towards a different form of polity.

While the demise of the nation-state is not in question (see O'Hearn and Wilson 2011, Adams et al. 2011), the emergence of new polities is announced by the changing functions of borders. Mainly due to the process of relentless removal of barriers to flows of goods and production factors, regions have become essentially a manifestation of functional cooperation within a territory (Ohmae 1996, Konrad 2006, Hirsch 2009) in need of a denomination of its own. Political will may not suffice or be relevant anymore for conducting economic policy; the concept of border brings up the terms of geographical and institutional proximity between territories treating regional communality as a political, economic, and cultural asset. A territory's common descriptor may be a centre of power (e.g. the nationalist movement in Catalonia, Spain), a salient feature of its people (e.g. religious devotion in the Bible Belt in the US), an extraordinary concentration of economic activity (Florida 2008: 41ff), or a common concern (e.g. environmental issues in Cascadia, a trans-boundary territory between the US and Canada). In full-fledged polities, we should expect that the 'common descriptor' increases its coverage in terms of all possible ranges of a community's interests – political, economic, and socio-cultural – and so ensuring a perfect overlap between the administrative and the functional. Our interest lies therefore in general in the *region* whose borders configure a space that dominantly attracts the attention of its inhabitants at the expense of outer centres of decisions. Even if that space may or may not eventually prefigure an emerging polity, it leaves no doubt about its generic location, within or across nation-states.

Discussions centred on regions at sub-national-level have been the staple of regional economics and policy. An illustrative case is the succession of the EU landmark decisions consolidating the economic role of regions from setting-up the European Regional Development Fund in 1975 to defining regions as national administrative units according to NUTS (*Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales à des fins Statistiques*) in 2003 and to the introduction of territorial cooperation as a programming objective in 2007.

The apparently flawless deployment of regional policy initiatives, sustained by an ever growing scholarship (see Boyce 2004), has been carried out in spite of the equivocal view

about the actual geographical contour, where *actual* stands for a perspective that takes into account not only the administrative, but also the functional of a region. Consider a typical definition (Eurostat 2009), where the region appears as “a tract of land with more or less definitely marked boundaries ... [whose] features may be particularly noticeable in one location, but are usually to be found to some degree over such a wide area that they cannot be used in themselves to mark off one region from another; in other words, the boundaries are ‘fuzzy’.” The implication is not evident in terms of financial allocation, because it targets clearly defined administrative units with the goal of attaining socio-economic indicators (e.g. occupational rates, education level, infrastructure investments etc.). However, narrowing the perspective on regions in purely administrative terms is simply ineffectual at operational level. What ‘operational (functional)’ *is* takes on different meanings depending on the policy objectives at stake; administrative units prove to be ineffectual in reaching an applicable competitiveness policy (Council on competitiveness 2010), in yielding relevant data on social capital (Gironde and Peterson 2014), or in accounting for borderless “epistemic communities” and generation of innovation (Pallagst 2011), all factors that are vital in the organisation of modern economies.

A *region* may also be placed in an indeterminate space beyond the nation-state. The classic debate has been framed in terms of the ‘core-periphery’ model of spatial organisation of growth centres and political influence (Paelinck and Polèse 1999). The poles are essentially defined by a function that indicates the degree to which the added-value is unevenly distributed along economic networks and cumulatively augmented in the direction of the core at the expense of the periphery, with the space in-between (the ‘semi-periphery’) enjoying partial prosperity at the risk of possible decline (Wallerstein 1974:355). The administrative role a region may play exists only in relation to ensuring governance within networks of arm’s length transactions.

There is more to understanding a region than this realist yet simplified triadic representation though. Spatial connections evolve to the point of integrating cultural affinities, social values, or economic preferences. From small-scale integration of labour markets to large-scale economic and monetary unions, functional regions play different roles in defining an economic space, either independently from or in close connection with the nation-states they belong to. The institutional variability of territorial arrangements is virtually boundless.

Lianos and Gerard (2012) speak of a paradigm shift from the classical conceptualization of integration, with the corresponding emphasis on economic efficiency, to a ‘holistic’ perspective defined on the notion of institutional-based trust. In their view, the underlying premise rests on the “ontological requirement” of enabling a progressive state of integration between “competing rationalities” of different sub-systems interacting across national boundaries. Market behaviour and other issues generally related to the way people actually react to choices in the marketplace make adherence to the same values critical to achieve internal market reform rather than the other way round. The importance of trust-enhancing mechanisms is reflected, among other things, by the apparently intriguing discrepancy in the EU economy between the dominant role of the services sector – an activity deeply anchored in identity-loaded social choices – and the slow pace of reform

in harmonizing this particular market.

Between prevalently administrative territorial units and prevalently functional ones, there is, finally, an intermediate locus to possibly place a *region*, namely “contiguous sub-national units from two or more nation states” (Perkmann 2007), or what the EU practice has made known as *cross-border cooperation structures* (CBCS). The process of cross-border cooperation capitalizes on the advantages of both roles of a spatial unit of analysis, administrative and functional. The former is reflected in coordinated interventions of countries in regional policies’ design and implementation, generally fulfilling the (contractual) need of an adequate territorial organization of authority (ESPON 2010); the latter resides in benefits that arise from cross-border externalities and spill-overs or linkages of all kind (economic, technological, social, cultural, environmental, etc.).

Analyses of determinants accounting for communality in CBCS (VanNijnatten and Boychuk 2004; Hlatky, 2012; Nadalatti 2014) emphasize convergence in major themes of common concern occurring among sub-national cross-border jurisdictions that is not as evident at national-level. However, trans-frontier areas include territories that are different. Geographic proximity may or may not lead to institutional proximity (cf. Talbot 2007, Silvers 2000, ESPON 2010) and further to transforming regional communality into a developmental asset. Table 1 summarizes the diversity of factors to account for when evaluating the potentiality of emerging polities.

Table 1. Policy areas of territorial integration

Areas of cooperation	Policy dimensions	Policy areas
(1) Economy	Economy - Technology	Labour and legal issues Economic and commercial agreements Enterprise collaboration Financial and fiscal issues
(2) Society	Cultural - Social	Quality of life Culture and heritage Sports and health
(3) Institutional	Accessibility	Transports and connectivity
	Environmental - Heritage	Sustainability and environment
	Institutional - Urban	Knowledge, research and innovation Institutional arrangements Strategic territorial development issues Regional planning

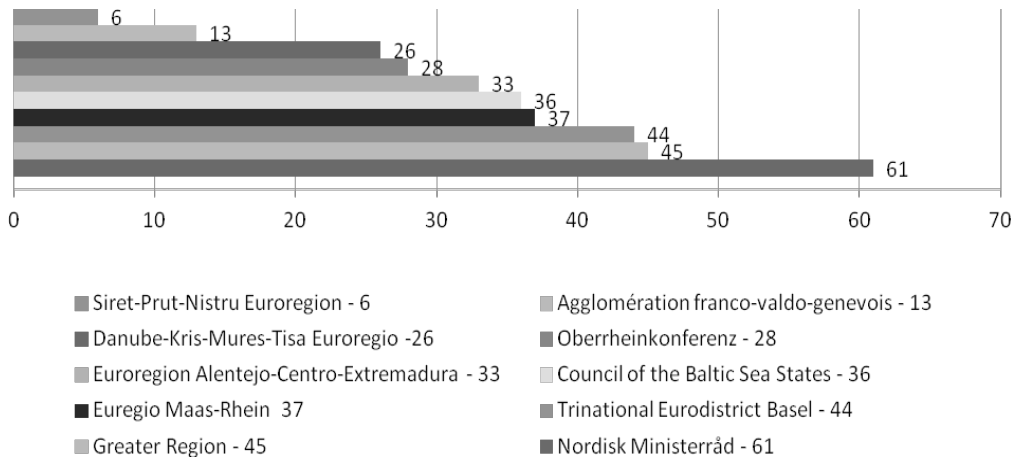
Source: Adapted from Medeiros (2015)

We follow this theoretical template to provide some (rough) estimates on the conditions of emerging polities in the case of a sample of CBCS' institutional cooperation frameworks.

3. Methodological approach

Our case study draws on previous results on institutional proximity for ten European cross-border cooperation structures³. We produced a qualitative assessment of each cooperation structure by assigning scores of institutional quality on two dimensions: breadth (the number of domains of cooperation) and depth (the level of integration on each thematic focus) of the level of integration (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Institutional strength of selected European CBCS



Source: Cojanu and Robu (2014)

Explanatory note: The projects of each CBCS were evaluated at one, two or three stars according to their institutional strength. The figure captures the depth of cooperation in each thematic focus calculated as a sum of the number of stars assigned to each project.

The initial results point to different integration speeds across CBCS, from more to less advanced regional structures. In this paper, we have searched further for expressions of political consensus or conflict within policies, objectives, opinions, etc. that appear in documents issued in the form of policy or research publications for each CBCS for three

³ The initial CBCS sample consisted of ten European regional groupings: Oberrheinkonferenz (Upper Rhine), Nordisk Ministerråd (The Nordic Council), Agglomération franco-valdo-genevois (Grand Geneva), Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa Euroregion, Greater Region, Siret-Prut-Nistru Euroregion, Euregio Maas-Rhein, Council of the Baltic Sea States, Trinational Eurodistrict Basel, and Euroregion Alentejo-Centro-Extremadura (EUROACE).

areas of cooperation, i.e. economy, society, and institutional, along policy dimensions and areas as described in Table 1.

Recent advancement in the linguistic and computational models revealed solutions for analysing political discourses (Albaugh *et al.*, 20). Researchers involved in the field argue that the meaning of communication frames itself on words, among which complex relations exist. The text “is an integral part of its context and the formalization of contextual patterning of a given word or expression is assumed to be relevant to the identification of the meaning of that word or expression” (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001: 4). The analysis of words from various corpora of text showed clusters with different relations in which the meaning of the words depends on its neighbours. This hierarchic association of words and spatial proximity within a sentence or a paragraph determines semantic fields, seen as maps or graphical charts. The abstract representation of language is transferred into models that suggest patterns of co-occurrence, indicating the semantic clustering. Such patterns indicate potential themes representative for the field of inquired corpora. Among the solutions proposed to analyse texts and words, we opted for content analysis, given its potential to develop “systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (Neuendorf 2002:1).

Before analysing the content of the texts, we had to collect relevant materials on cross-border cooperation. We opted to mine the web to extract the texts. More specifically, the official and related web-sites of CBCS were crawled to download all the text uploaded and considered to be thematic documents. Because not all of the CBCS sites contained enough documents, only three of the original sample regions remained for analysis: Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), Greater Region (GR), and Nordic Council (NC), to which we added the Oresund Region (OR) and the South Eastern European Region (SEER). The grouping of text into categories according to the three directions of cooperation involved reading of the documents and consultation among the members of the team. After these steps, the relevant texts (Table 2) of each category underwent data preparation to uniform various expressions that might be considered individual words and to clean irrelevant information (like bibliography, web-links).

Table 2. The number of CBCS documents used in the content analysis

CBCS	Economy	Society	Institutional
Baltic Sea Region	25	62	19
Greater Region	13	7	4
Nordic Region	9	5	11
Oresund Region	16	5	22
South Eastern Europe Region	10	6	7

Analysing the patterns and reviewing the frequency of words are parts of the content analysis which we used to gain understanding over the proposed working hypothesis.

While the content analysis comprises many other steps, in this paper we focus on exploring the themes revealed by words co-occurrence from each of the corpora that may indicate models and strength of the three directions of cooperation. The rationale is that if words specific to the three areas of cooperation appear well structured, this indicates their respective directions and the importance of cooperation.

Data collection consisted in extracting meaningful information from respective documents to emphasize the scope of common themes and their level of convergence among CBCS members. Besides the visible links among CBCS, there is a large amount of hidden knowledge inside the documents which create, manage and shape the future of regional structures. In our research, we mined the texts to explore the content of documents on each selected region, on each area of cooperation and on the participating countries. The results were further explored inside a thematic mapping of clusters, which is analysed through content analysis. The structure of the networks emerged from selecting top 100 words and using random-walks option to represent the communities, option that allowed a better structuring of the clusters (Aggarwal 2011).

Furthermore, the corpora involved the separation based on countries inside a CBCS, which resulted into cross-tabulation analysis of the respective countries according to the initial structuring of the emerging themes (see Table 1). Consequently, the resulting corpora were coded and the codes were used to create a dictionary to find the possible existing relations among different levels of structuring inside the territorial space. To help the analysis, the KH Coder software (Higuchi 2014) was employed, which offers various tools for text mining and the possibility to expand the research by exporting the results into R software. While its use in regional studies was not so visible, some research exploited its capabilities to explore the characteristics of knowledge coordinators in regional revitalization (Chihara et al. 2011) and identification of barriers that may hinder the cross-border collaboration process (Nieda and Tanaka).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 The wording of policy dimensions

Among the regions, frequency of words indicates the major elements among which the policy themes are structured. Elements of cooperation at regional level emerged from sorting the top 10 words of each region to see what the indicators for common elements are. The most frequent expressions that were found in all CBCS refer to official names of organizations, 'region', 'projects', 'governance', 'policy', 'development' and 'cooperation' showing preoccupation for a formalized relation of cross-border cooperation and for a careful planning of the objectives and their achievement ('impact', 'planning', 'implementation', 'management'). The institutional level of actors involved in cooperation is also discussed in some CBCS using words like: 'governance', 'local', 'transnational', but it is less frequent a topic of discussion.

4.2 Co-occurrence analysis

The co-occurrence analysis reveals the main themes for each region and the possible relationships among them.

The Baltic Region economic clusters suggested the intensity of developing projects at different scales, involving the different structures (CBSS, HELCOM) specific for this organization. They focus on strengthening the cooperation by acting on the Baltic Sea as a complex system, fact suggested also by the institutional map. In the case of society and the institutional map, the issues are more specific (e.g. ecological structures, marine protection, social development, child security) and help increase the understanding of this initiative of cooperation.

In the Greater Region, the economic dimension is mostly connected to the cities theme on which cross-border cooperation is high. The regional perspective indicates that cooperation is related to research and industry partnership. These themes showed continuation within the institutional map, transportation distinguishing itself as the main theme. The same for the society map, where the two main clusters (culture and artists mobility) indicate additional themes of cooperation in the region.

The Nordic Region cooperation records a complex structure for all of its dimensions, being characterized by marine management, energy issues and unemployment for the economic dimension, infrastructure and organization issues for the institutional, while the social is focused on urban challenges, welfare, and social challenges.

The Oresund Region analysis reveals strong relations with the development theme, especially spatial development through transportation and business. Other major concerns focus on energy and environment challenges.

The case of SEE region shows connecting words on partnership, cooperation, and development. In the institutional, one cluster dominates the map, the one of regional identity. The social dimension discloses the importance of cultural heritage.

4.3 Converging themes in emerging polities: a discussion

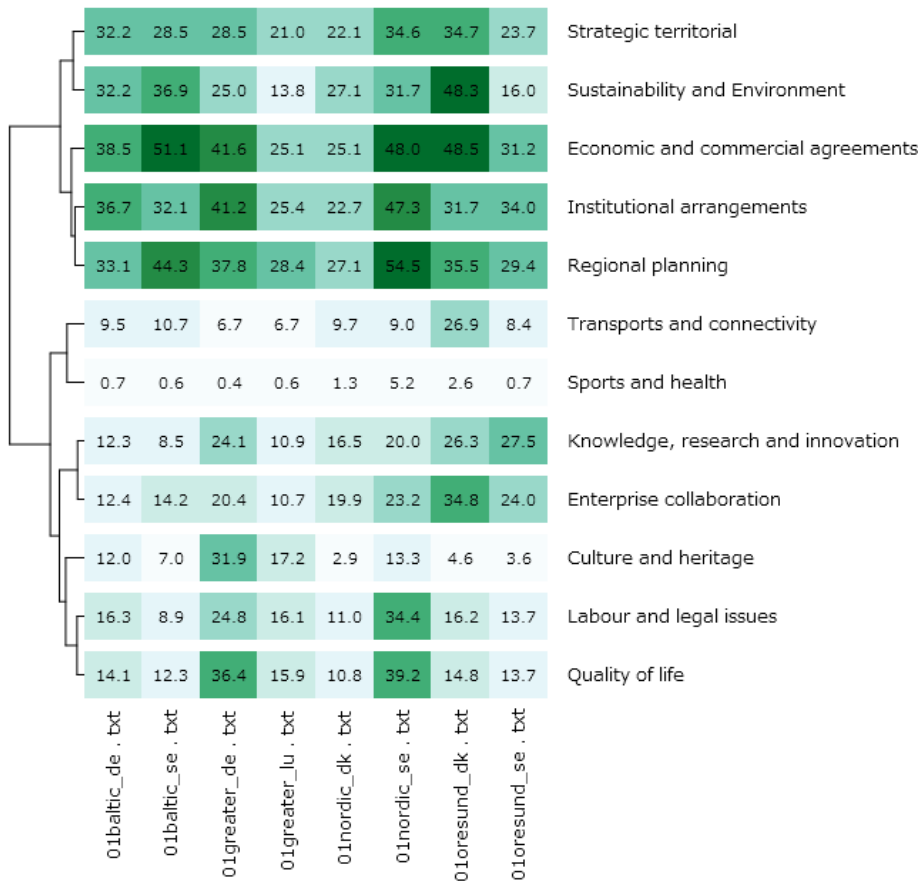
The results of cross-tabulation analysis (Figure 2) involved countries with a number of documents for which we set a cut-off point of at least three for at least one country and summing over 1,000 paragraphs per country in the final corpora of a region. On these criteria, the South Eastern European region, as well as several participating countries could not be included in the analysis.

The general map of converging themes shows a high level of similarities both between participating countries, and between sample regions. Several thematic directions attract most of the attention: strategic territorial development issues (STDI), sustainable and environment issues (SEI), economic and commercial agreements (ECA), institutional arrangements (IA), and regional planning (RP). The considerable degree of convergence around these themes may be explained by the need to control for externalities in situations that should be coordinated in the cross-border region. The classical subject matter of

economics – the management of limited natural resources – is visible in the cooperation framework, as these resources are found on a common territory, being equally important to social and economic problems (Degórski, 2008).

The results emerging from the words frequency and co-occurrence maps indicated a well framed image of each region with some persistent themes within each dimension. Across the five CBCs belonging to our sample, policy cooperation themes are developed according to the specific problems of each region. Those regions (Baltic Region and Nordic Region), which have sea access cooperate for a clean environment, both coastal and maritime, and for the protection of maritime species, while SEER countries cooperates for clean mountains, biodiversity, and natural landscape conservation.

Figure 2. Percentage of similar words in each thematic area at country level



Source: Authors' calculations.

Among the common themes, strong similarity is noticed for Baltic countries (Germany, Sweden), where STDI and SEI and IA record close high values. Another pair of countries (Denmark and Sweden from Oresund Region) face the same situation, but with a much wider spread of themes incorporated. For these two regions, the results reappear at a smaller scale in the case of the remaining themes. In the case of Greater Region and Nordic Region the variability is higher for the aforementioned themes, significant differences of frequency being recorded.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we collected policy documents to identify a common language as proxy for common descriptors that orient the cooperation activity of selected cross-border regions. The clusters of common words and expressions that we have found in research documents, opinions and CBCSs' goals and actions suggest that the cross-border coordination of policies may lead to the emergence of viable territorial units: polities that address the encompassing range of policy interests of a community - economic, social, and institutional. Dense occurrences of words which designate themes of cooperation showcase a high interest for themes that are strategic and general, but also for practical and specific ones, although to a lesser extent. They are part of large clusters of words with strong connections between them ensuring a relatively balanced overlap with the policy areas as generally identified in the literature.

The existence of common language throughout the three directions of cooperation shows that the selected regions are well integrated (possibly also the reason why we have found more official documents for these regions) and there is a good coordination between the policies inside that CBCS. It also suggests that social and institutional development is strongly connected to the economic dimension (although most of the common themes were identified between the society and institutional topics).

The paper started from the hypothesis that the viability of emerging territorial units depends on the way their members reach a converging approach towards issues of common concern. For two of the selected regions – Baltic and Oresund – the results show that this is the case; the evidence we have gathered indicates a convincing case towards the possibility of emerging polities. This research, however, did not look farther than the policy space that is relevant for territorial integration of markets, leaving aside the economic and the socio-cultural spaces, for which different conceptual frameworks and methodologies are needed. Even if it is thus premature to advance any definite conclusions on the possible rising of future (European) polities, this paper suggests the transition from nation-states is making certain progress.

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