



**INTERREG IVB Central Europe 'City-Regions' project**

# **Are there arguments for a Central European macro-regional strategy?**

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## Executive summary

This report was prepared within the **context** of the INTERREG IVB Central Europe project 'City Regions'. It takes as starting point the emerging map of EU-macro-regional strategies that have over the past years been prepared for the Baltic Sea Region, the Danube Region, the Adriatic-Ionian region, and (under development) for the Alpine Region. EU macro-regional strategies are organised around a transnational rationale of shared ecosystems (river basin, regional sea, mountain range), and are implemented through a comprehensive action plan of jointly identified and implemented projects and by making use of existing EU and national funds. EU macro-regional strategies are on request of the European Council prepared by the European Commission jointly with actors in the region. They are aimed at achieving better coordination of actors, policies and resources, but without being allocated additional funding, new legislation or new institutions. For the new EU Cohesion Policy period 2014-2020, however, transnational territorial cooperation programmes ('INTERREG VB') have been aligned with the EU macro-regions to facilitate the coordination of funding.

The **guiding question** for this report, within this context of EU macro-regional strategies, is whether there are arguments for an EU macro-regional strategy for Central Europe. The decision to develop a macro-regional strategy within the current EU policy framework requires significant political commitment from national and regional actors. However, rather than trying to assess the political will for transnational cooperation or the development of a macro-regional strategy in Central Europe, this report takes as starting point the identification of issues within the region which would benefit from, or require, cooperation at the transnational (macro-regional) scale, and to detect possible sub-spaces within Central Europe where cooperation could be deepened around common agendas. The findings of this report can contribute to a wider political discussion within Central Europe of the issues for transnational cooperation, the geographical scope for addressing these issues most effectively, and the most suitable approach to organising cooperation between different actors.

Different **definitions of 'Central Europe'** exist, so instead of using a strict definition of the geographical extension of this region, the report adopted a broad 'search region', covering parts of all of Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Croatia and parts of northern Italy, to identify the key issues for cooperation. This is also the region which is covered by the European transnational territorial cooperation programme (INTERREG IVB Central Europe) in the EU Cohesion Policy period 2014-2020.

**Conceptually**, the report focuses on truly transnational issues, that is, those which cannot be addressed sufficiently by nation-states or regions acting alone, but which require cooperation across administrative borders. For such issues, a 'rescaling' to a higher level of scale would be useful, but the understanding of functional connections also implies that for every issue considered the geographical reach will be different and thus also which governance arrangement is most suitable for the task might vary. This focus on a core transnational rationale for cooperation has also been recently emphasised by the European Commission as a crucial precondition for the development further macro-regional strategies.

In terms of the **methodological approach**, the report combines desk-based study of policy documents, spatial development reports and prior analyses with qualitative interviews with key actors in some of the countries and regions of Central Europe (Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Austria, Italy). In the analysis of the key issues for cooperation, the report considers first a top-down perspective, by reviewing the main landscape features of Central Europe and recent spatial development trends. EU policy initiatives with a spatial expression and a requirement for cooperation across borders are discussed, notably those in the area of river basin management, transport corridors and energy networks which offer alternative perspectives on Europe's geography centred around such sectoral policy agendas. The issues for cooperation defined for the 'INTERREG B' cooperation programmes for Central Europe are also reviewed. Second, and switching to a bottom-up perspective, the report reviews existing forms of transnational cooperation in the region which have been set up since the fall of the Iron Curtain and become more institutionalised over time.

These are notably the Visegrád Group and the Central European Initiative as important political platforms in the region, and the Carpathian Convention as a cooperation initiative focused on an ecologically sensitive area. The analysis is complemented by altogether nineteen interviews with actors from across Central Europe that allow indicative insights into the perceived needs for transnational cooperation, the barriers to cooperation, and actors' views on how cooperation might best be organised.

The **top-down analysis** of Central Europe shows that the region is very diverse in terms of economic development, cultural backgrounds and environmental and social challenges. There are several large river systems (Danube, Elbe, Vistula, Oder) and mountain ranges (Alps and Dinaric Alps, Carpathian mountains) which are important geographical features, but they define sub-spaces of the larger region rather than Central Europe as a whole. Also recent trends in terms of economic development, employment, innovation capacity, and environmental problems show a rather diverse picture, with a West-East divide still visible in economic structures, and increasing regional disparities between the capital cities of Central and Eastern Europe and the rest of these countries. An inheritance of environmental pollution in formerly intensively used areas and as a consequence of heavy road traffic in many regions of Central Europe is another concern. Moreover, transport infrastructure and accessibility are much less well developed in areas along the former Iron Curtain and the Central and Eastern European EU member states than in North-west and Western Europe.

Previous ESPON studies have sought to assess the potential for more sustainable economic development through a policy of polycentric development, and the following **possible growth regions** were identified which would benefit from cooperation, integration, improved accessibility between the centres and by building upon functional specialisation: a 'Danube zone' (defined by Munich, Prague, Budapest, Ljubljana, Vienna), an 'Eastern central zone' (Copenhagen/Malmö, Berlin, Prague, Bremen), and a 'Triangle of Central Europe' (between Warsaw, Berlin and Vienna). All these potential integration zones are currently, although to different extent, hampered by low accessibility. While the 'Danube zone' and 'Eastern central zone' are now included in the EU macro-regional strategies for the Danube region and Baltic Sea Region respectively, the 'Triangle of Central Europe' can be seen as having an important 'bridging function' between these spaces, between West and East, and between the regional seas to the North and South. The potential of this bridging function depends on whether strong economic and transport links can be established between the 'Triangle' and wider Europe, and will require a consideration of avoiding negative (e.g. environmental) effects from such improved accessibility and corridor development.

Several **EU sector policies offer spatial perspectives** on Central Europe. These include the EU's water policy that promotes a river basin management approach, and the EU's transport and energy infrastructure policy that define priority axes and development corridors. There are many significant transboundary rivers in Central Europe, such as Elbe, Oder and Vistula to the North, and the Danube (already covered by a macro-regional strategy) to the South. Of the proposed priority axes of the EU's Trans-European transport policy, seven corridors are crossing through Central Europe and – once implemented – would significantly improve passenger and freight transport connections on (high-speed) rail, waterways and road. Connections to ports in the North and South, and improving connections to the hinterlands of these sea and river ports, provide an important argument for these connections, which means that the seven proposed axes of relevance to Central Europe also extend far beyond this region to other parts of Europe. Also the priority corridors of the EU's energy infrastructure policy seek to connect the land-locked countries of Central Europe better to ensure reliable energy supply, by improving gas and oil interconnections to the pipelines and the regional seas in the North and South and by strengthening the electricity network in North-South as well as East-West directions. While all these EU policies have clear spatial implications, the 'map' that arises from the cooperation needs around these policy agendas is one of different sub-spaces and development corridors within or including Central Europe, rather than a comprehensive and integrated cooperation agenda for Central Europe as a whole. Moreover, the proposed initiatives are

perceived from their respective sectoral perspectives, rather than offering a broader perspective on the spatial development needs and potentials of the region as a whole.

Also the **cooperation programmes for INTERREG IVB (2007-2013)** and **INTERREG VB (2014-2020)** for Central Europe, which provide dedicated funding for transnational territorial cooperation comment on the considerable diversity of the region, but aside from highlighting some shared economic, social and environmental challenges in some parts of Central Europe do not succeed in identifying the truly transnational issues that would require cooperation, nor key strategic projects that would address the development needs of Central Europe. However, under the INTERREG IIC and IIIB programmes the projects 'VISION Planet' and 'PlaNet CenSe' sought to identify the key spatial development issues for cooperation in Central Europe, and highlighted several sub-spaces that share commonalities and around which cooperation should be organised. These are partly overlapping and include a 'Central European Interaction Area' (along the former Iron Curtain), the Adriatic Sea Region, the Danubian cooperation zone and the Black Sea cooperation area, the area covered by the Stability Pact for South East Europe, and the Carpathian Development Region. The projects concluded that there is no coherent Central European growth region, but that the identified sub-spaces and the potential growth region of the 'Central European Triangle' would provide suitable areas for cooperation around shared agendas, albeit requiring improved accessibility to reap their potential.

A switch of the analysis to a **bottom-up perspective** first reviewed existing forms of intergovernmental cooperation in the region. Sub-regional groupings in Central Europe are the Central European Initiative (CEI) with currently 18 members; and the Visegrád group (V4) with four members (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), both with a focus on fostering European integration through political cooperation. Jointly with Bulgaria and Romania, the V4 countries recently agreed to better coordinate their national spatial development initiatives, and have developed a joint strategy that identifies development needs in relation to transport infrastructure and energy networks in the six countries. While the political cooperation of both the CEI and V4 is based on shared challenges and potentials, the great differences and disparities in the countries involved are also recognised. Instead of presenting a clear transnational rationale, therefore, the groups frequently emphasise their important position as a 'bridge' between different parts of the European continent and the EU macro-regional strategies in particular. In addition to these intergovernmental groups, the Carpathian Convention is also of interest to the discussion of shared agendas in the Central European space. The Carpathian Convention is focused on addressing environmental and economic issues in the sensitive ecoregion of the Carpathian Mountains that are shared by Romania, Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland and Czech Republic. There have been calls by actors involved in the Carpathian cooperation for a recognition of this region as one of the EU macro-regions and as a dedicated INTERREG cooperation programme.

The findings from the **interviews with key actors** from Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria and Italy confirmed that the great diversity and size of Central Europe does not lend itself easily to an identification of a clear transnational rationale for cooperation. For most actors, their starting point for identifying a need for further cooperation are their domestic agendas, which explains why cross-border cooperation with direct neighbours, cooperation around large-scale development corridors (such as the TEN-Ts) and networking activities (in relation to economic and trade connections) were given much attention in the interviews. Many interviewees emphasised the need to improve the accessibility in the region in order to stimulate economic development, but also identified several barriers to further cooperation in the region around transport projects and other cooperation needs. These barriers stem from shifting political agendas, which for transport infrastructure improvements are seen as currently favouring North-South over East-West connections, despite many persisting bottlenecks across the former Iron Curtain. More generally, the interviewed actors argued that greater political awareness for transnational issues was needed to address the challenges in the region and also clarify the agenda and priorities for cooperation. It was felt that much political attention over the past years had been directed at domestic issues, and that as a consequence also administrative and financial support for transnational cooperation had been cut back, resulting in an

even more limited capacity to consider those issues which would require a rescaling of agendas and cooperation across national borders. On the other hand, the EU macro-regional strategies are acknowledged as an increasingly important frame of reference for actors to position themselves and to consider how their region (however defined) would 'fit' into this macro-regional map of Europe. Even so, rather than embarking on a complex task such as developing a macro-regional strategy for Central Europe, a wider discussion of the agenda for cooperation and how to best address cooperation needs was seen as important. In doing so, existing (EU) policy agendas and bottom-up forms of cooperation are an important input into the debate, on which basis a discussion could be held on issue-specific and scale-flexible cooperation needs, and possible sub-spaces for more intensive cooperation in Central Europe.

The report **concludes** that the region of Central Europe is too large and diverse to offer any clear rationale for transnational cooperation, and observes that there seems currently little support for developing an EU macro-regional strategy. However, this does not mean that there is no scope for improved and deepened cooperation, but rather that the cooperation needs (of which many can be identified resulting from different policy initiatives and for different sub-spaces) may be more fruitfully addressed in a more flexible approach than through an integrated strategy. This is also because a geographically more flexible approach, which allows to explore connections more openly than a clearly defined 'macro-regional space' would, is likely to be more conducive to clarifying the cooperation needs of Central Europe and its sub-spaces, considering the frequently mentioned 'bridging function' of the region. In a first step, it would be useful to engage in a wider discussion about the needs for cooperation in Central Europe which emerge around new and existing policy agendas and recognised shortcomings in cooperation needs, and to consider how coordination between such sectoral perspectives could be better organised. Existing forms of bottom-up cooperation and the potential for integrated cooperation zones, which were identified in earlier studies, might be a useful starting point for an agreement on cooperation and coordination needs and benefits in Central Europe.

## 1. Introduction

What are the large-scale spatial development issues that require cooperation between nation-states and regions in Central Europe? Are there arguments for an EU macro-regional strategy for Central Europe, akin to the EU strategies prepared for the Baltic Sea Region (EC 2009) and the Danube region (EC 2010a), to address these key transnational issues effectively? If so, what would be the suitable delineation for this transnational region, or macro region, in Central Europe? These are the guiding questions for this report which was prepared in the context of the INTERREG IVB Central Europe project 'City Regions'.

'Territorial cooperation', whether at city-regional or metropolitan-regional scale, at cross-border or at transnational (macro-regional scale) is considered an important means to respond to larger-scale functional challenges that territorial-administrative authorities cannot sufficiently address alone. By definition, however, each functional interrelationship will have different reach and geographical extension, depending on the issue considered. For flood management around transnational rivers, thus, different spaces, and therefore also different territorial actors and policy communities, will be concerned than for transnational labour markets or cross-border housing markets, or for inter-regional energy networks. Some of these transnational issues and their extension will be easier to identify than others and remain more stable over time. For example, while commonly accepted maps now exist of the catchment areas of Europe's rivers, other issues are more fuzzy and their reach is less easy to delineate and more affected by external (e.g. economic) factors. In any case, addressing transnational issues effectively requires governance arrangements suitable for the task, and the political will to cooperate across administrative borders.

This report seeks to provide an input into the discussion of what the transnational issues are for Central Europe which can be identified from recent trends and EU policy documents, and which are considered important from the perspective of stakeholders across the region. In terms of conceptual and methodological approach, rather than seeking to assess the political support for a potential Central Europe macro-regional strategy (or to foresee the possible political power that such an initiative could develop in this region), this report thus takes an issue-oriented focus, by trying to identify the possible topics and spaces which might require or benefit from cooperation in the Central European space.

The approach taken in this report has been to review existing cooperation initiatives in the region and to gather views from different stakeholders working on spatial, economic, environmental and transport issues and who are involved in cooperation initiatives with neighbouring countries about priorities and topics for transboundary cooperation, with a view to identifying which (sub-) regions emerge. For the purposes of this report, as it aims at identifying the key transnational issues for cooperation and their possibly different extensions, no strict definition of the geographical extension of 'Central Europe' is provided. This is because ongoing discussions about the region's identity and coverage suggest that 'Central Europe' is not a clearly defined region, and indeed one can find many maps of 'Central Europe' which depict rather different spaces, depending on the historical viewpoint of the map author. Even so, any attempt to identify transnational issues for cooperation requires a 'search area', and for the purposes of this report the area of Central Europe is understood as covering parts or all of the following countries: Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Croatia and parts of northern Italy.

This report is structured as follows: in the next chapter, an overview of the policy debate on EU macro-regional strategies is provided and the focus on 'key transnational issues' for territorial cooperation is explained. The conceptual framework for the discussion in this paper and the methodological approach to identifying key transnational issues in Central Europe is set out in chapter 3. In chapter 4, a brief overview of main spatial development trends affecting Central Europe (and the EU more generally) is given, and in chapter 5 key strategic EU policies are discussed which consider alternative 'metageographies' at transnational scale. Chapter 6 presents the analysis of the key strategic issues for cooperation in the European transnational territorial cooperation

programmes for Central Europe for the programming periods 2007-13 (INTERREG IVB) and 2014-20 (INTERREG VB). In chapter 7, the focus will switch from a birds-eye view to a view from *within* the region, discussing some of the existing forms of 'bottom-up' cooperation which were initiated by political leaders of the nation-states and regions in Central Europe. In chapter 8, the perspectives of some key actors in countries located in Central Europe on the issues for transnational cooperation will be presented. Chapter 9 presents the concluding reflections.

## **2. EU macro-regional strategies: a brief review of the policy debate**

Transnational cooperation has a long history in some parts of Europe, as for example in the Benelux countries and the Nordic countries, with some cooperative arrangements established soon after WWII to address common and urgent spatial development issues. Since the late 1990s, with the financial support of the EU through the 'INTERREG' programmes, transnational cooperation in large contiguous areas has become a regular feature in European policy discourse. Considering alternative territories to those of nation-states to address certain (functional) policy challenges and to establish cooperative governance arrangements involving different countries and regions around shared agendas has received even more political attention with the launch of EU macro-regional strategies for certain transnational regions since 2009.<sup>1</sup>

EU macro-regional strategies are, on request of the European Council, prepared by the European Commission jointly with actors in the regions. They cover large areas of several countries or federal states and are aimed at achieving better coordination of actors, policies and resources around shared transnational agendas. EU macro-regional strategies have been described by DG Regio as 'integrated framework' (Samecki 2009: para 2.1), with which the European Union and Member States can 'identify needs and match them to the available resources through co-ordination of appropriate policies' (EC 2010b: 2).

The EU macro-regional strategies which have been prepared to date cover both EU member states and third countries. They, and those which are under preparation and under discussion, are framed around an ecosystems-based argument of seas, river basins and mountain ranges. These are seen as the 'connective tissue' to achieve cohesion and coordination inside the EU, as well as to provide a bridge to non-EU members in pursuit of what has been called a 'soft security agenda' of the Union (Bialasiewicz et al. 2013). The first macro-regional strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, adopted in 2009, was developed to address the increasingly serious degradation of the Baltic Sea but also the disparate development paths of the countries in the region (EC 2009; EC 2010b; EC 2012). A similar transnational rationale is provided for the EU macro-regional strategy for the Danube Region, adopted in 2010 (EC 2010a; EC 2010c). Two other macro-regional strategies, for the Adriatic-Ionian region and the Alpine region, are in preparation, and others are under discussion. The result may be a network of partly overlapping cooperation spaces which cover the European continent (see Figure 1).

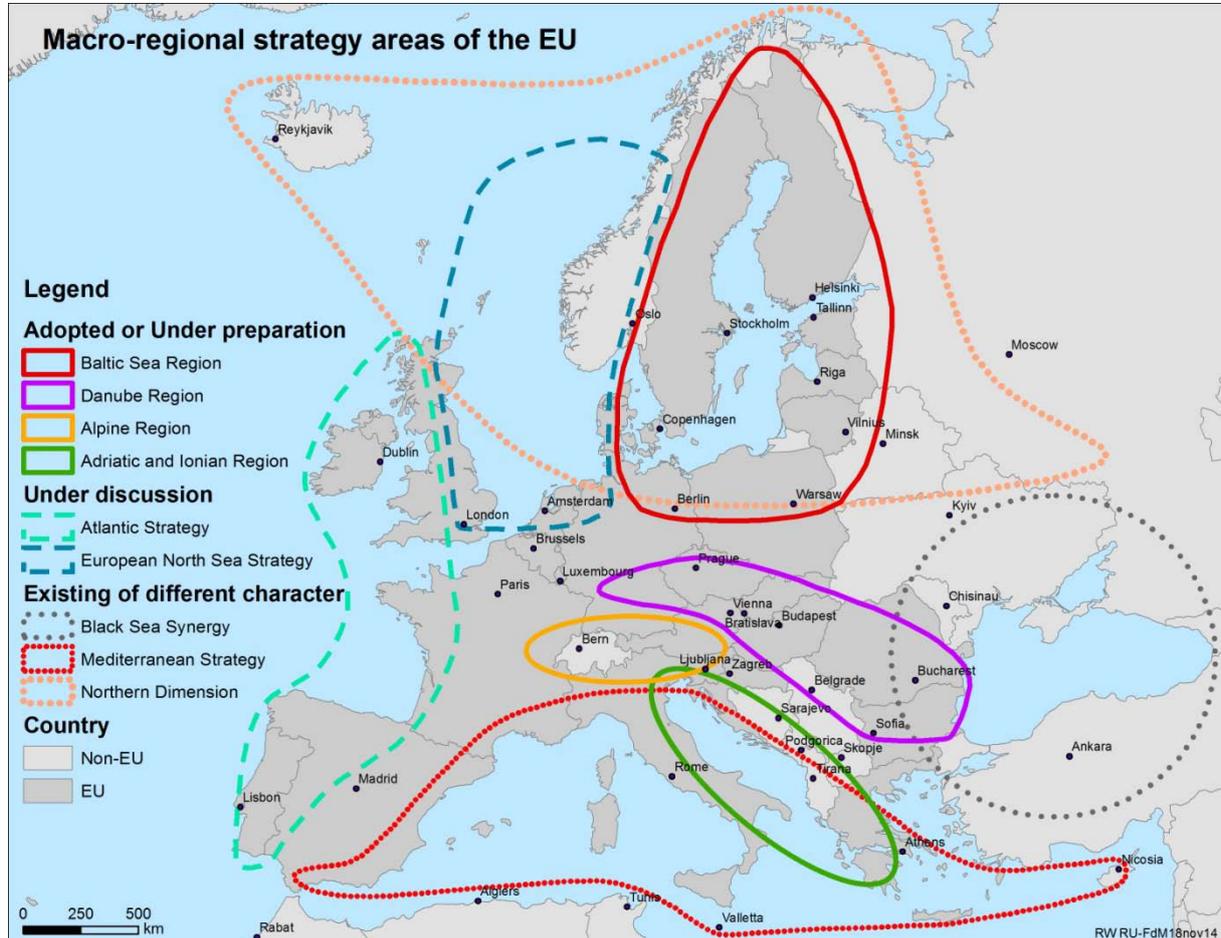
In their inception it was emphasized that EU macro-regional strategies would not be supported by new funds, new legislation or new institutions (Samecki 2009). Instead, actors should make use of the wide range of EU funding sources to achieve the agreed joint objectives. Despite these stated intentions, concerns have been raised early on by actors involved in the Baltic Sea Region and Danube Region strategies about the difficulty of aligning EU macro-regional strategy objectives with existing EU funding programmes, as these are targeted towards specific EU programme objectives and usually organized around national or regional, rather than transnational, priorities (EC 2010e). In response to such concerns, the decision has been taken for the EU Cohesion Policy period 2014-2020

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the background and approach of EU macro-regional strategies please see, amongst others, Dühr (2011) and Dühr (2013).

to adjust the transnational INTERREG programme areas (European transnational territorial cooperation, or 'INTERREG VB') to the delineation of the EU macro-regional strategies and to ensure that the INTERREG programmes support the objectives of the macro-regional strategy.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: EU macro-regional strategies and sea basin strategies**



Source: information based on European Commission reports and BBSR; Visualisation: S. Dühr and R. Wunderink

While greeted enthusiastically by many as a possible way out of the EU's 'coordination trap', the prioritisation of actions for transnational spaces is proving a political challenge in the EU macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea and Danube regions. Also the question of how governance arrangements can be most effectively organized and how lasting political support for their implementation can be ensured proves challenging. Identifying issues for cooperation at the supra-national scale inevitably involves struggles over the prioritising of interests, rights and claims for policy attention. Yet the filtering is a crucial process, because if strategies are to inspire and motivate a range of actors over a long period of time, they need to be more than merely an aggregation of issues (Healey 2007). The experience with the transnational INTERREG programmes has shown that

<sup>2</sup> This affects a restructuring of the South East Europe programme into INTERREG VB programmes for the Danube region and for the Adriatic-Ionian region (as well as a new Balkan-Mediterranean programme). For the Baltic Sea Region and the Alpine Space, the transnational territorial cooperation programmes and the area covered by the EU macro-regional strategies were already identical and therefore no changes were introduced to the eligible areas for the Cohesion Policy period 2014-2020. The expectation for the INTERREG VB programmes is that where an EU macro-regional strategy exists, the cooperation programmes should contribute to achieving their objectives (see EU 2013a).

broad frameworks with largely generic funding priorities rarely result in projects of real significance for the transnational region (Panteia et al. 2010), and also the EU macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea and Danube regions have been criticised for presenting overly long lists of projects and actions, many of which not specific to the transnational region. The added-value of EU macro-regional strategies, thus, is arguably greatest for those issues which countries or regions cannot solve or satisfactorily address by acting alone, but which require joint responses. Policy priorities and actions specific to the macro-region and resulting from a shared transnational agenda will more likely result in lasting political commitment and administrative support than a mere replica of EU policy objectives or cooperation around issues of common concern that are largely regional or local in focus. Such truly transnational issues may arise from tasks that by definition cross national borders, such as water management of transnational river basins. They may also be related to issues where source and effect are physically separated, such as in the case of air pollution, or where public policies of one country will have externality effects in other countries, such as changes in the capacity of seaports (Dühr et al. 2010).

Based on a review of the macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea and the Danube regions, and responding to the widespread enthusiasm for this approach across Europe, the European Commission has formulated clearer criteria for the launch of new macro-regional strategies (EC 2011a, EC 2013). In future, EU support (notably through policy and political attention of the EU institutions and a coordination role of the European Commission) will only be provided for initiatives that demonstrate a clear need or rationale for cooperation at the transnational scale, and that can draw on relevant political support and existing ('bottom-up') transnational arrangements (as those are seen as indicating a recognised need for transnational cooperation in this region). Commitment of the participating countries and regions to 'translate political commitment into administrative support' (EC 2013: 10) needs to be evident for new initiatives, and the added-value of such a model of cooperation for the transnational region should be demonstrated. And while the European Commission has initially taken an active and leading role in the development and implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, a recent Communication from the Commission emphasizes the need for stronger ownership of the countries and regions concerned to ensure the lasting success of these arrangements (EC 2014a). Given the considerable effort involved in setting up and implementing EU macro-regional strategies, and the availability of numerous other instruments of informal as well as more formal nature (e.g. EGTCs) to organize territorial cooperation around shared agendas, the rationale, added-value of and the political support for such a rather complex instrument should therefore be thoroughly considered.

### **3. Conceptual considerations and methodological approach**

There are two conceptual viewpoints which can help to understand the interest in EU macro-regional strategies and perceived benefits of governance responses at the transnational scale, and these will provide the framework for the analysis presented in this paper. The first viewpoint relates to the process of European integration as a whole, and the European perspectives which are proposed (and implemented through different EU policies) as alternatives to the established focus on nation-states as main arena for decision-making. Complementing this European (top-down) perspective are drivers from within the nation-states and regions around shared agendas for cooperation, which provide a political arena for 'region-building' at transnational level. These complementary perspectives – top-down and bottom-up – on cooperation needs around certain issues, and the spaces for cooperation that are identified around these policy agendas will be briefly discussed in this section. This conceptualization also provides the argument for the methodological approach taken in this report, which is described at the end of this section.

The interest in macro-regions can be explained as a consequence of the process of EU integration, which is prompting changes in competences across existing levels of decision-making within nation-states and has resulted in a sharing of power in an increasing number of policy areas between the EU and its member states (Dühr 2014). Such changes are commonly referred to as 'rescaling', defined as 'the process in which policies and politics that formerly took place at one scale are shifted to others in ways that reshape the practices themselves, redefine the scales to and from which they are shifted, and reorganize interactions between scales' (McCann 2003: 162). The European integration process is providing many opportunities for the creation of new and 'loosely-bounded spaces' (Keating 2009: 39) and corresponding governance arrangements at different levels of scale. Such rescaling processes question the dominant role of the nation-state because they invite a discussion on the suitable scale for action for certain policy problems which is not pre-defined by national borders. Yet, aside from being the legitimate and democratically accountable arena for decision-making, the 'metageography'<sup>3</sup> of the modern nation-state continues to present a powerful frame of reference that explain some of the challenges that alternative forms of regionalization (such as macro-regions) commonly experience.

In a globalised world and a Europe of open borders, the boundedness of the nation-state presents considerable limitations to address the real geographies of problems and potentials. In response to different policy problems, the EU has, over time, become a prolific producer of alternative perspectives on Europe that order space according to different rules than the accepted map of national borders. Many EU initiatives, such as the Water Framework Directive (WFD), EU funding through the cross-border and transnational INTERREG programmes, or the recent EU macro-regional strategies, present such experimental arenas for action around certain policy agendas, which in some cases (as for the WFD) require dedicated transboundary governance arrangements for river basins. In trying to respond to such challenges of 'spatial fit' (Moss 2004) between real-life problems and existing institutional arrangements, the EU is with such 'spatial policies' trying to transcend the barriers that national borders present to effective policy responses.

While in some cases – as with the WFD - transboundary and functionally specific governance arrangements are legally required, there are also numerous examples of 'voluntary' transboundary governance arrangements. Many of these collaborative arrangements have been initiated 'bottom-up' by the nations or regions concerned in response to perceived shared problems and potentials. However, financial support from the European Commission through the INTERREG programme has meant that the number of cross-border and transnational spaces has multiplied since the 1990s. Today there exist numerous cooperation arrangements of varying stages of formalization in Europe that have been set up by the cooperating countries without direct involvement of supranational institutions such as the EU.

Yet, the definition of a relevant space for action is of course not just based on functional logic or requirements 'from above'. Rather, the emergence and evolution of 'transnational regions' relies on ongoing political support and leadership. It is a process of social construction by key actors and different interests to determine at which level an issue will be managed, and through which awareness for the transboundary agenda grows and becomes shared. Even where the need for coordinated action is accepted, the transnational dimension challenges the established and deeply-rooted perspective on the nation-state as the main arena for activity. Therefore, as Healey (2007) has argued, the idea of such a region must first be 'summoned up' in a discursive process, whereby convincing narratives are established that can support the development of a transnational regional identity. The process of strategy-making, during which a common ground between different and sometimes competing interests is established, and which results in agreement on a joint vision for future action, is a key aspect of such region-building.

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<sup>3</sup> The term metageography refers to the 'spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world: the often unconscious frameworks that organize studies of history, sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, or even natural history' (Lewis and Wigen 1997: ix, cited in Murphy 2008: 9).

These two perspectives on transnational ‘region-building’ – from above through EU policies and incentives, and from below driven by key actors’ perceived need for the upscaling of issues to the transnational level, provide the framework for the analysis presented in this report. The focus, however, is on identifying the issues for cooperation that arise from these perspectives, rather than an attempt to assess the political support for macro-regional cooperation in Central Europe (which for any lasting cooperation arrangement at transboundary scale would be crucial). With this focus on the issues that would require or benefit from transnational cooperation in Central Europe, first the main spatial trends affecting European regions and key EU policies of spatial relevance are discussed. The INTERREG programmes for Central Europe for the Cohesion Policy periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 are then analysed with a view to extracting the key transnational issues that have been identified for the transnational region. The ‘bottom-up’ perspective of the analysis include a review of the existing forms of transnational or subregional cooperation in Central Europe in relation to their scope, membership and objectives. Lastly, altogether 19 qualitative interviews with key actors in five countries in the Central European space (Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Austria and Italy) were conducted. These interviews give an indicative insight into those transboundary spatial issues in the region which key actors representing different national and sectoral viewpoints consider important. They allow a tentative assessment about the perceived needs and benefits of cooperation at the transnational region (or several smaller sub-regions) in Central Europe. In annexe 1, the list of interview partners is provided, and the guideline questionnaire which was used for the interviews is reproduced. The interviews were undertaken by different experts involved in the City Regions project. They were conducted by phone, in person and in some case by mail survey, and in the preferred (native) language of the interviewee.

#### **4. Major geographical features of Central Europe and key spatial development trends**

Central Europe – however defined – is characterized by a considerable diversity of cultures, languages, and economic and social systems. As many arguments for current EU macro-regional strategies are centred around regional seas and large-scale shared landscapes, it is useful to start with a discussion of the major geographical features of Central Europe (Figure 2) and the biogeographical regions which can be defined in this space.

Across the EU, there are nine biogeographical regions, each with specific characteristics of climate, geology and vegetation (EEA 2002). The Central European space is divided into three biogeographical regions, each of which covering several countries.

The Continental biogeographical region, which covers East Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic (and parts of other countries) is due to fertile soils and warm summers one of the most intensively used agricultural areas in Europe, although forested areas are increasing. The Eastern part of the Central European Region has been experiencing significant urbanization since the fall of the Iron Curtain, and an increasingly dense infrastructure network contributes to the further fragmentation of habitats. Rapid industrialisation in Poland, eastern parts of Germany and parts of the neighbouring areas of Czech Republic has severely polluted air, soil and groundwater in many areas. Mining and quarrying have seriously altered the landscape, disrupting land use and drainage patterns and removing habitats for wildlife. Many of Europe’s large rivers cross the region, such as Danube, Elbe, Oder and Vistula in the Central European space, and these are often highly regulated, interconnected by canals and prone to flooding (EEA 2002). However, the interconnected river systems not only facilitate traffic, but also enable species to spread via the water or via vessels and ballast tanks. The Vistula, together with the Oder, is the biggest polluter of the rivers feeding into the Baltic Sea, yet at the same time long stretches of natural river landscape remain along its course with intact species-rich habitats. River conventions and habitat restoration programmes have shown successes in recent years (EEA 2002). The Continental biogeographical region is not covered by any special types of

international collaboration on biodiversity, but it is of course subject to the general international, pan-European and EU policies and agreements. In addition, there are multilateral action programmes for the region's large river systems, such as the UNECE convention on the protection and use of transboundary watercourses and international lakes and the conventions for rivers such as the Danube, Elbe and Rhine (EEA 2002).

**Figure 2:** Major geographical features of Central Europe



Source: Kpalion, map base DEMIS Mapserver.

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[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Major\\_geographic\\_features\\_of\\_Central\\_Europe.PNG#mediaviewer/File:Major\\_geographic\\_features\\_of\\_Central\\_Europe.PNG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Major_geographic_features_of_Central_Europe.PNG#mediaviewer/File:Major_geographic_features_of_Central_Europe.PNG)

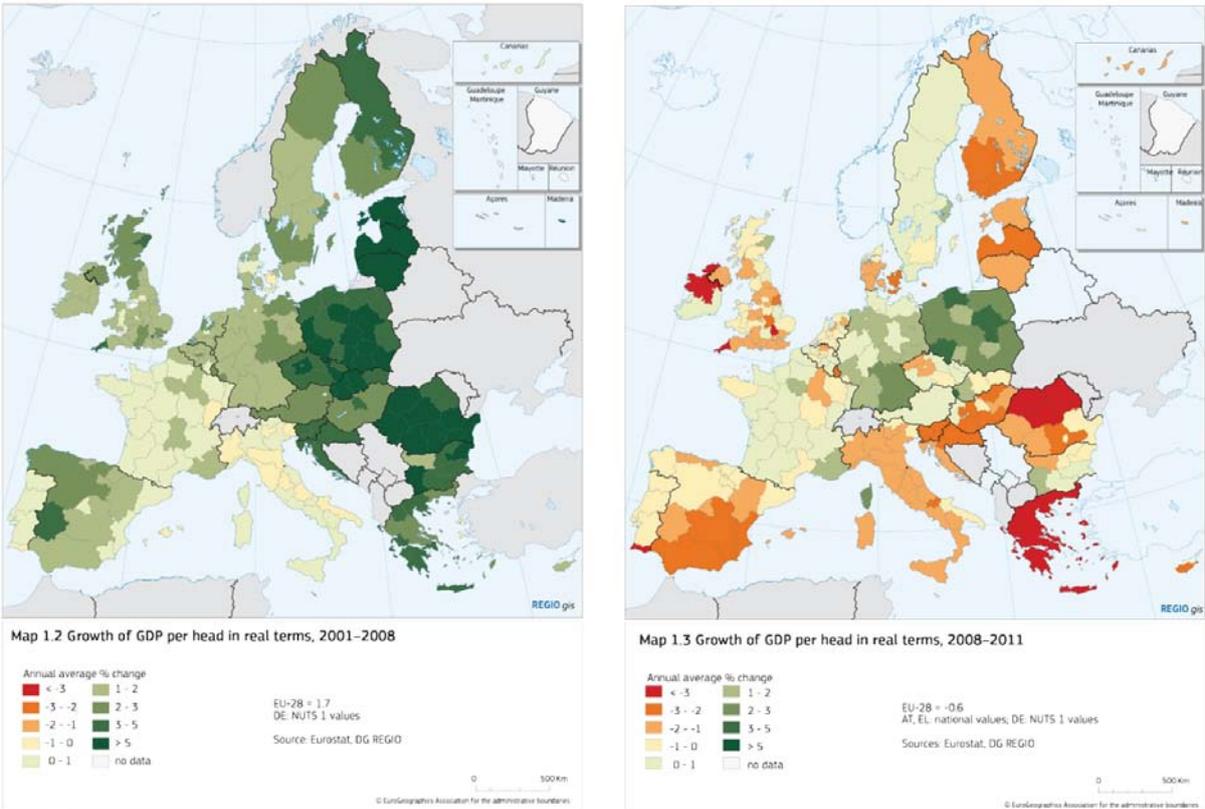
The Pannonian biogeographic region, also known as the central Danubian basin, is surrounded by mountains (the Alps in the west and the Dinaric Alps in the south). The main feature of the region is the Great Hungarian plain; with other constituent countries being Czech Republic, Serbia, Croatia, Romania, Slovak Republic and Slovenia. The Danube, which flows from north to south, has numerous tributaries. The Pannonian region is covered by the Sofia initiatives for cooperation on local air pollution, economic instruments, environmental impact assessment and biological diversity, which the environment ministers of central and eastern European countries (CEE) signed in 1995. The Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), a non-profit making organization, has the goal to help solve environmental problems in CEE and encourages cooperation among non-governmental organisations, governments and businesses (EEA 2002).

The Alpine biogeographical region includes large mountain ranges such as (of relevance to Central Europe) the Alps, the Carpathians, and the Dinaric Alps. The Dinaric Alps span areas of Italy, Slovenia, Croatia and Balkan countries. The Carpathians stretch from the Czech Republic, through Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Ukraine to Romania and Serbia. Forests cover more than 90 % of the

Carpathians with some of Europe’s largest stands of virgin forest. Over the last ten years new problems have arisen as a result of the privatisation of lands, with many new owners practising unsustainable activities. In particular, sensitive areas in the upper parts of the mountains are threatened by tourism development and skiing infrastructures (EEA 2002). The Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (‘Carpathian Convention’) was adopted and signed by the seven constituent countries in 2003 and entered into force in January 2006. It is the only multi-level governance mechanism covering the whole of the Carpathian area and besides the Alpine Convention the second sub-regional treaty-based regime for the protection and sustainable development of a mountain region worldwide.

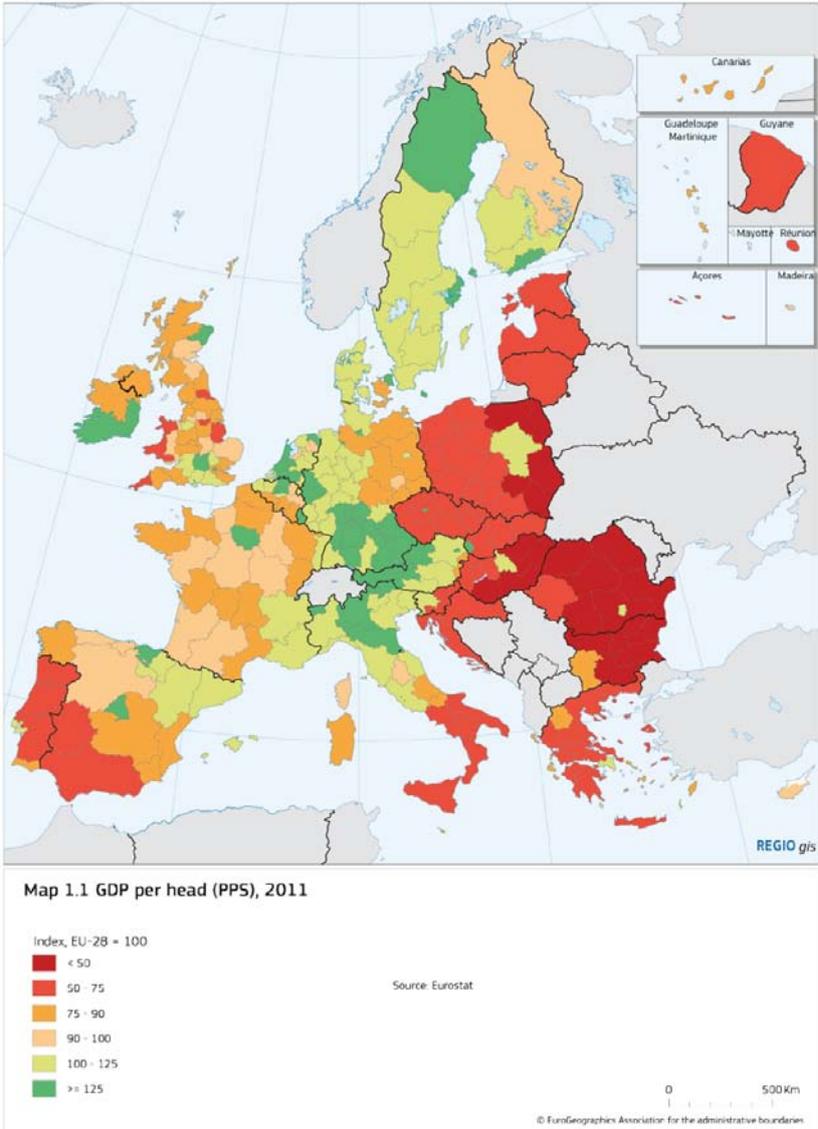
In relation to spatial development trends, Central Europe has experienced significant changes since the end of the Cold War in 1991, and the subsequent accession of many Central and Eastern European countries to the EU in 2004 and 2007. In economic terms, considerable growth rates of GDP per head were achieved in many regions of Central and Eastern Europe over the years 2001-2008 (Figure 3a), leading some commentators to suggest that a new growth zone was emerging in Eastern Europe. This ‘yellow banana’ was predicted to complement the traditional economic core region of Europe, commonly called the ‘Blue Banana’, stretching from London to Milan (Hospers 2003; Dühr 2007). The economic crisis has, however, significantly affected the economic development of many regions across Central Europe. The current picture is one of considerable diversity, with some regions (notably in Germany and Poland) still experiencing growth while others have suffered a serious downturn of their economies in the years 2008-2011 (Figure 3b). The resulting picture of GDP per head in 2011 still shows significant differences between ‘East’ and ‘West’ in the Central European space (Figure 4).

**Figure 3a (left) and 3b (right):** Growth of GDP per head in real terms between 2001 and 2008, and between 2008 and 2011



Source: EC 2014b: 4

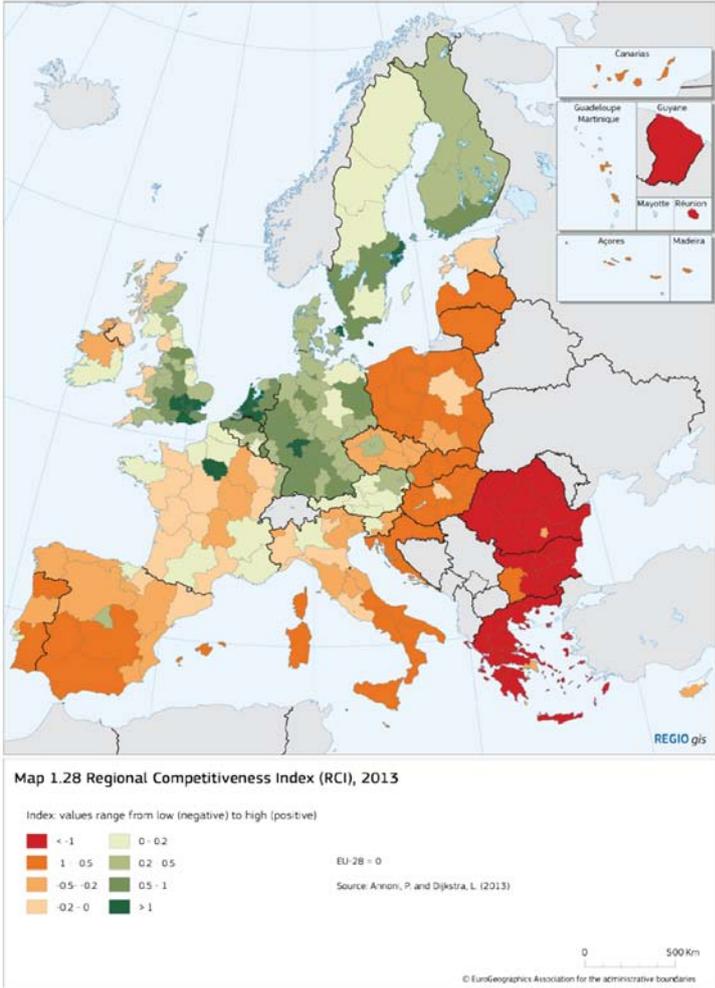
**Figure 4: GDP per head (PPS), 2011**



Source: EC 2014b: 2

In terms of employment structure, the EU’s recent Cohesion Report (EC 2014b: 11) observes that ‘Central and Eastern European member states maintain a strong industrial sector, but their agriculture needs to continue to modernise’. While employment in industry and agriculture is declining in Central and Eastern European countries, more jobs were created in services over the past years. This transition requires a focus on new sets of skills, however, which have to develop through investments in training. Currently, however, many regions of the Eastern member states in the Central European region – with the exception of capital city regions – show low competitiveness compared to regions in North-west Europe (Figure 5).

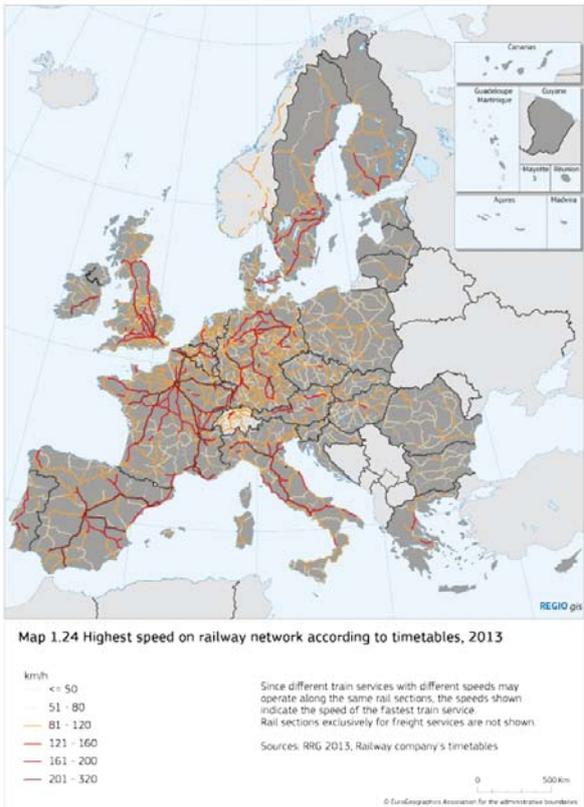
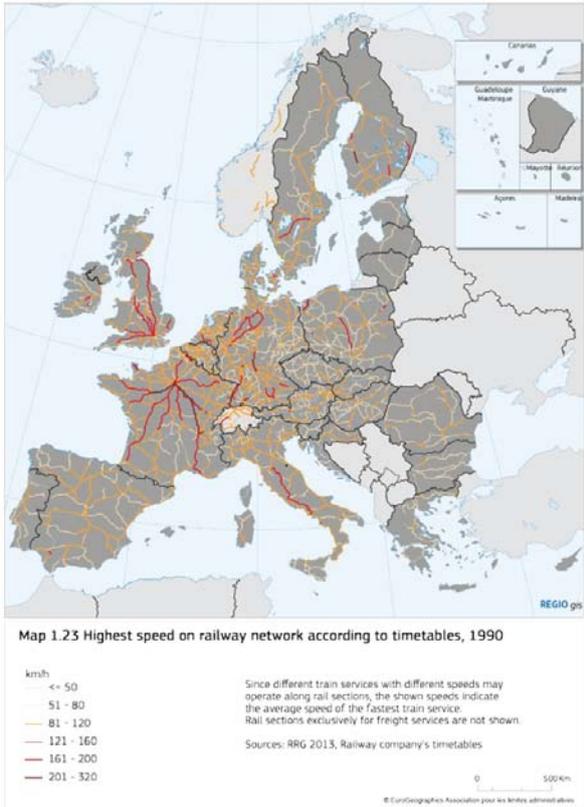
**Figure 5: Regional Competitiveness Index (RCI), 2013**



Source: EC 2014b: 53

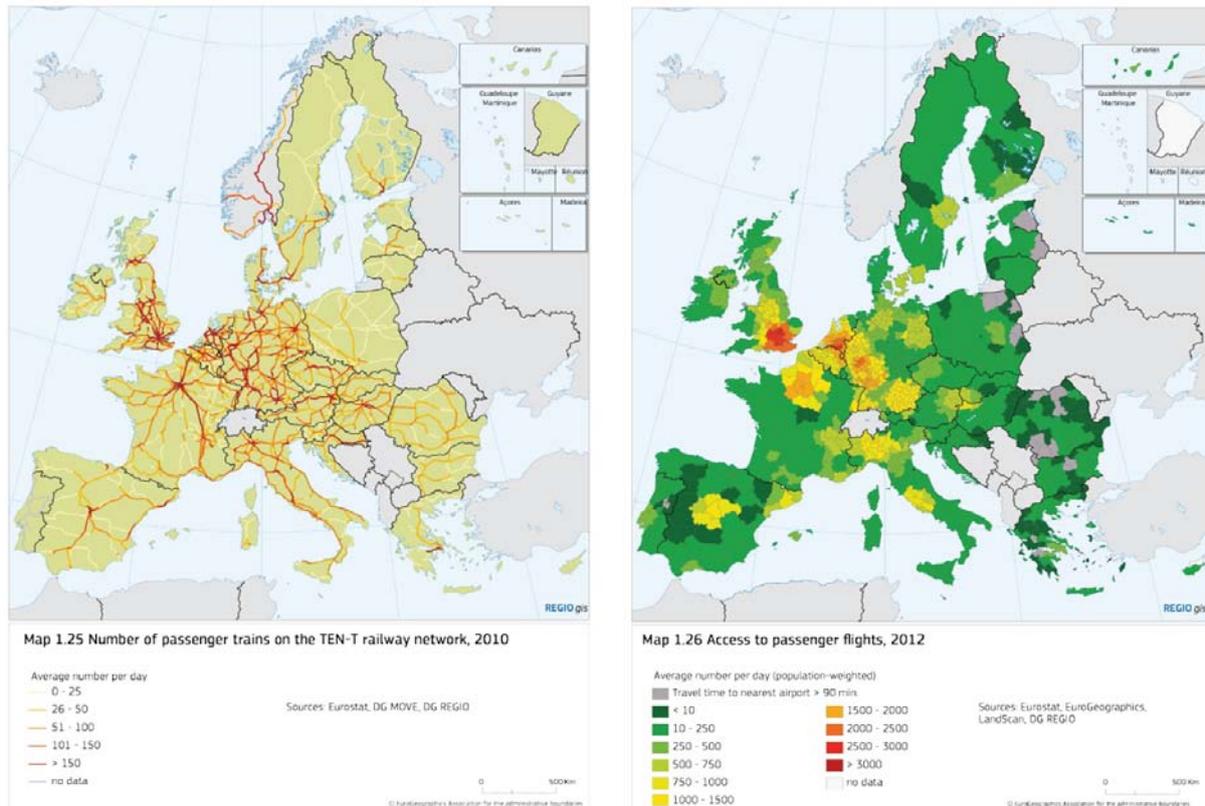
There also remain considerable differences in levels of accessibility across Central Europe (Figures 6 and 7), and the Sixth Cohesion Report (EC 2014b) observes that due to low speeds and low frequencies of trains in Central and Eastern Europe, road transport remains the dominant mode of transportation of goods and passengers. EU transport infrastructure policy (discussed in the next section) is aimed at addressing such imbalances in accessibility and at improving the flow of goods and people across Europe by upgrading connections and removing bottlenecks.

**Figure 6: Highest speed on railway network, 1990 and 2013**



Source: EC 2014b: 47

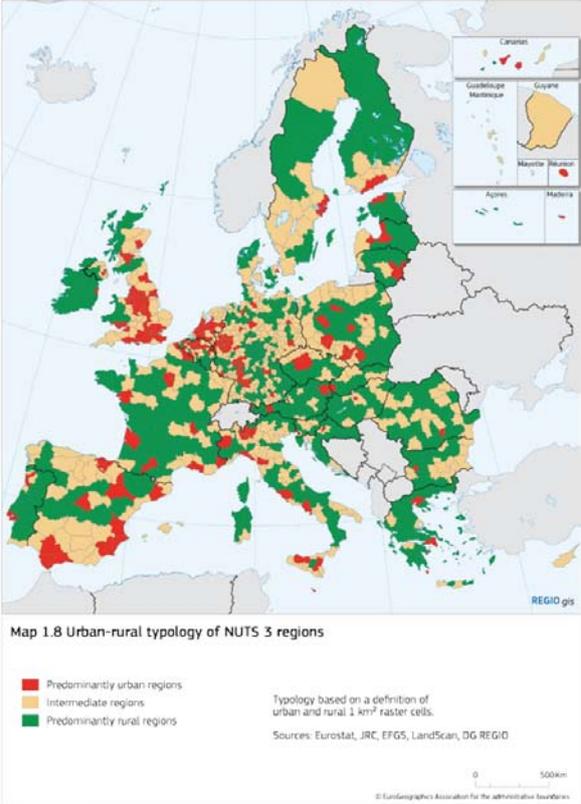
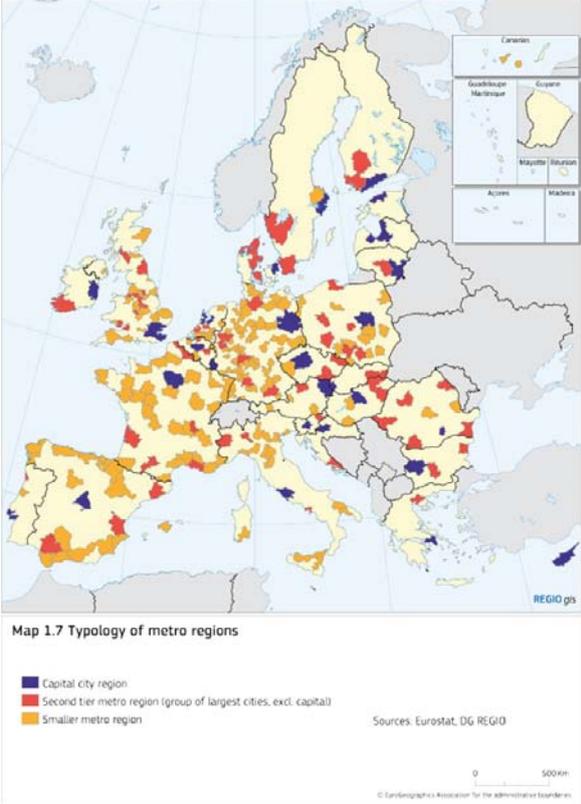
**Figure 7:** a (left) Number of passenger trains on the TEN-T railway network, 2010.  
b (right) access to passenger flights, 2012



Source: EC 2014b: 48

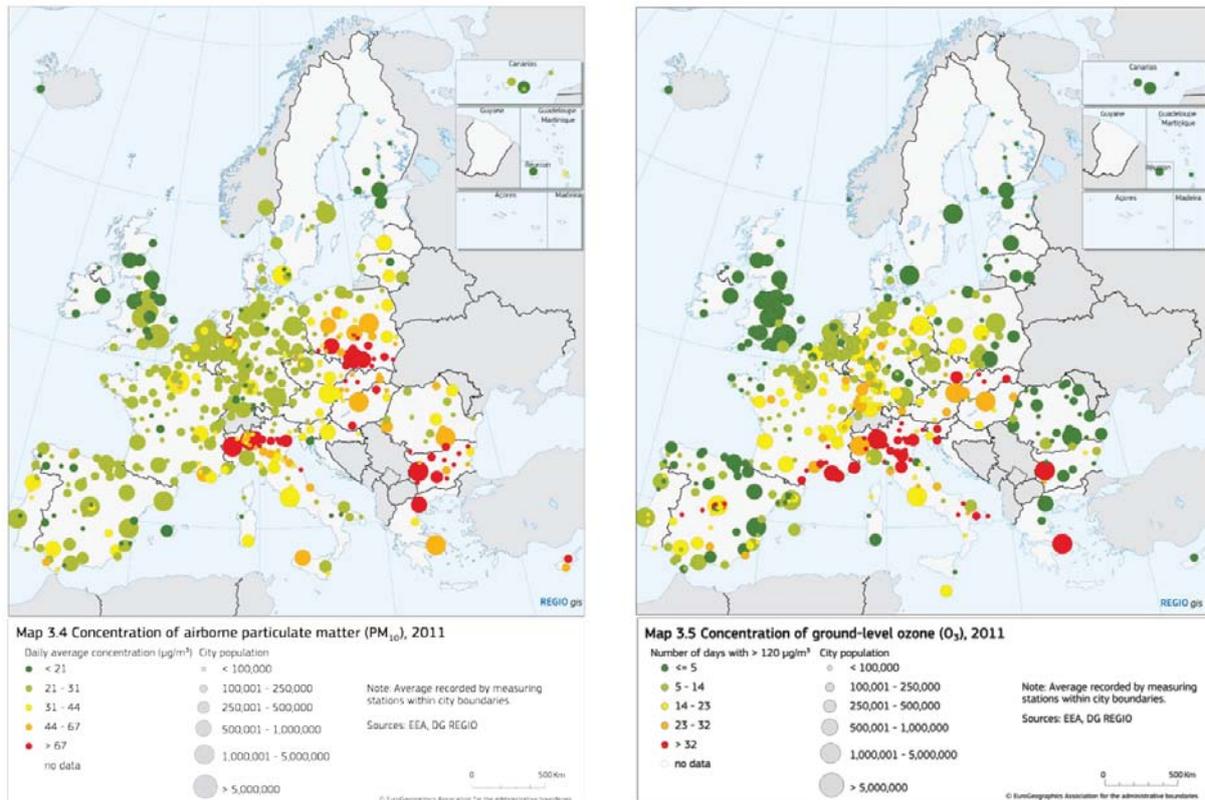
The largely monocentric urban structure of many Central and Eastern European countries, with dominant capital city regions (Figure 8), together with the reliance on industrial and agricultural activities and road transport, also affect the air quality, which in some regions significantly exceed the thresholds specified in EU Directives. In terms of health impacts, airborne particulate matter ( $PM_{10}$ ), ground-level ozone ( $O_3$ ) and nitrogen dioxide ( $NO_2$ ) remain the most problematic pollutants. Regions most affected by high  $PM_{10}$  concentrations are those in the Po Valley in Italy, in southern and central Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria (Figure 9a). High concentrations of  $O_3$  occur mostly in the southern EU member states, including Northern Italy (Figure 9b) (EC 2014b).

**Figure 8: Urban and rural structures**



Source: EC 2014b: 22

**Figure 9:** a (left) Concentration of airborne particulate matter (PM<sub>10</sub>), 2011.  
 b (right) Concentration of ground-level ozone (O<sub>3</sub>), 2011

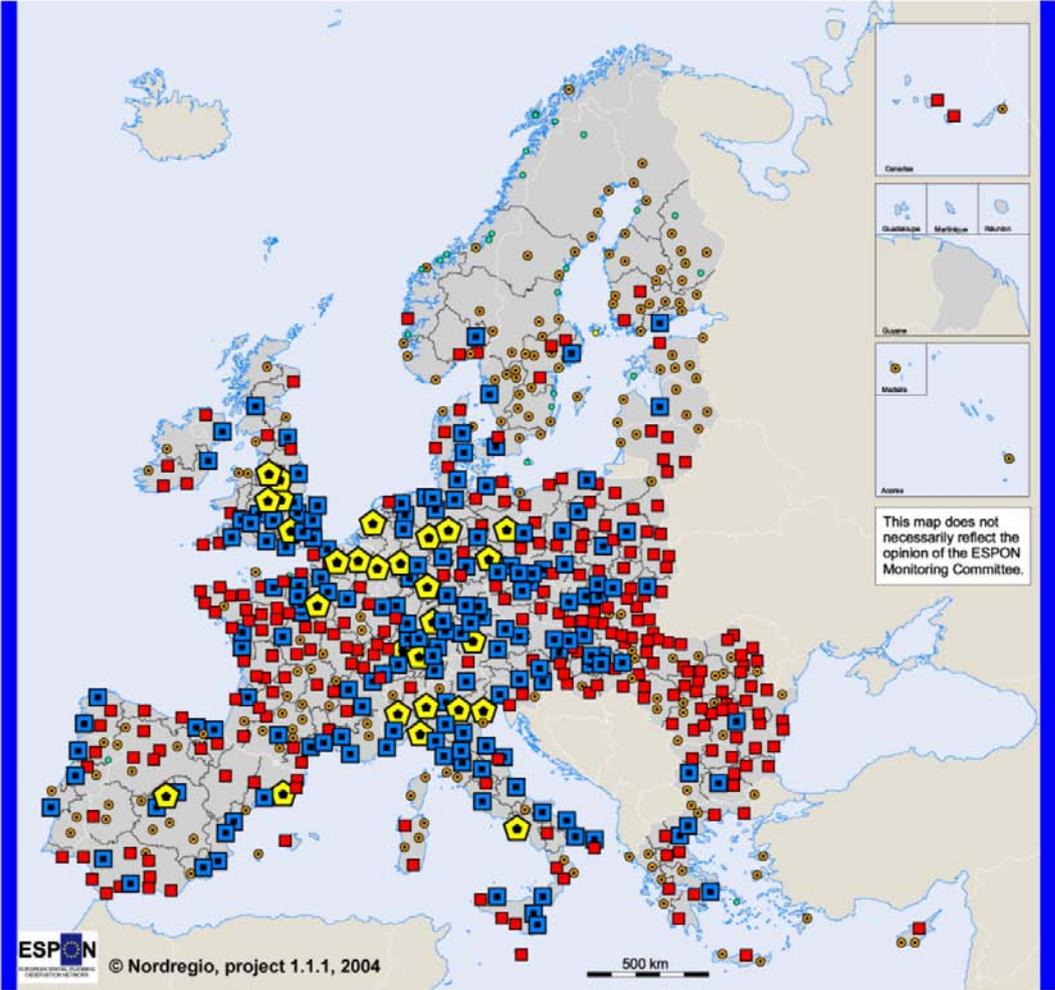


Source: EC 2014b: 116

These trends demonstrate that considerable differences across Central Europe still exist in relation to economic development and levels of accessibility, and that economic activities focused on industry and agriculture, unsustainable mobility patterns and a largely monocentric settlement pattern also result in negative environmental impacts. However, a focus on more balanced development – requiring cooperation between cities – might arguably help to steer the region towards more economically successful paths with more sustainable patterns of development. This is the assumption behind the notion of polycentric development, which the ‘European Spatial Development Perspective’ (ESDP) (CSD 1999). There have been several studies since the adoption of the ESDP by the EU Ministers for spatial planning in 1999, which tried to assess the prospects and challenges for economic development and accessibility in relation to the notion of a more balanced and polycentric pattern of urban development. The ESPON 2006 project on polycentric development (ESPON 2006 project 1.1.1, 2005a) analysed the urban structure of the European Union and sought to identify potential growth regions in a more polycentric EU. The study defined ‘functional urban areas’ (FUAs), based on functional relations between cities and towns, PUSHs (Potential Urban Strategic Horizons), and MEGAs (Metropolitan European Growth Centres). Based on the hypothesis that neighbouring cities with overlapping travel-to-work areas (PUSHs) can be functionally integrated and can gain from cooperation, Potential Polycentric Integration Areas (PIAs) were identified. Figure 10 shows that Central and Eastern Europe lies outside the area with the greatest population potential, but the ESPON 2006 project 1.1.1 report suggests that the larger PIAs in this region could improve their positions through integration and by building upon functional specialisation.

**Figure 10: Potential Polycentric Integration Areas in EU27 + 2**

**Classification of potential Polycentric Integration Areas according to total population**



ESPON  
© Nordregio, project 1.1.1, 2004

Geographical Base: Eurostat GISCO

Number of inhabitants in Potential polycentric integration Area

- ⬠ > 5 million inhabitants
- ⬠ 1-5 million inhabitants
- ⬠ 250 000-1 million inhabitants
- 50 000-250 000 inhabitants
- < 50 000 inhabitants

Origin of data: National Statistical Offices

Data sources: ESPON NUTS 5 database

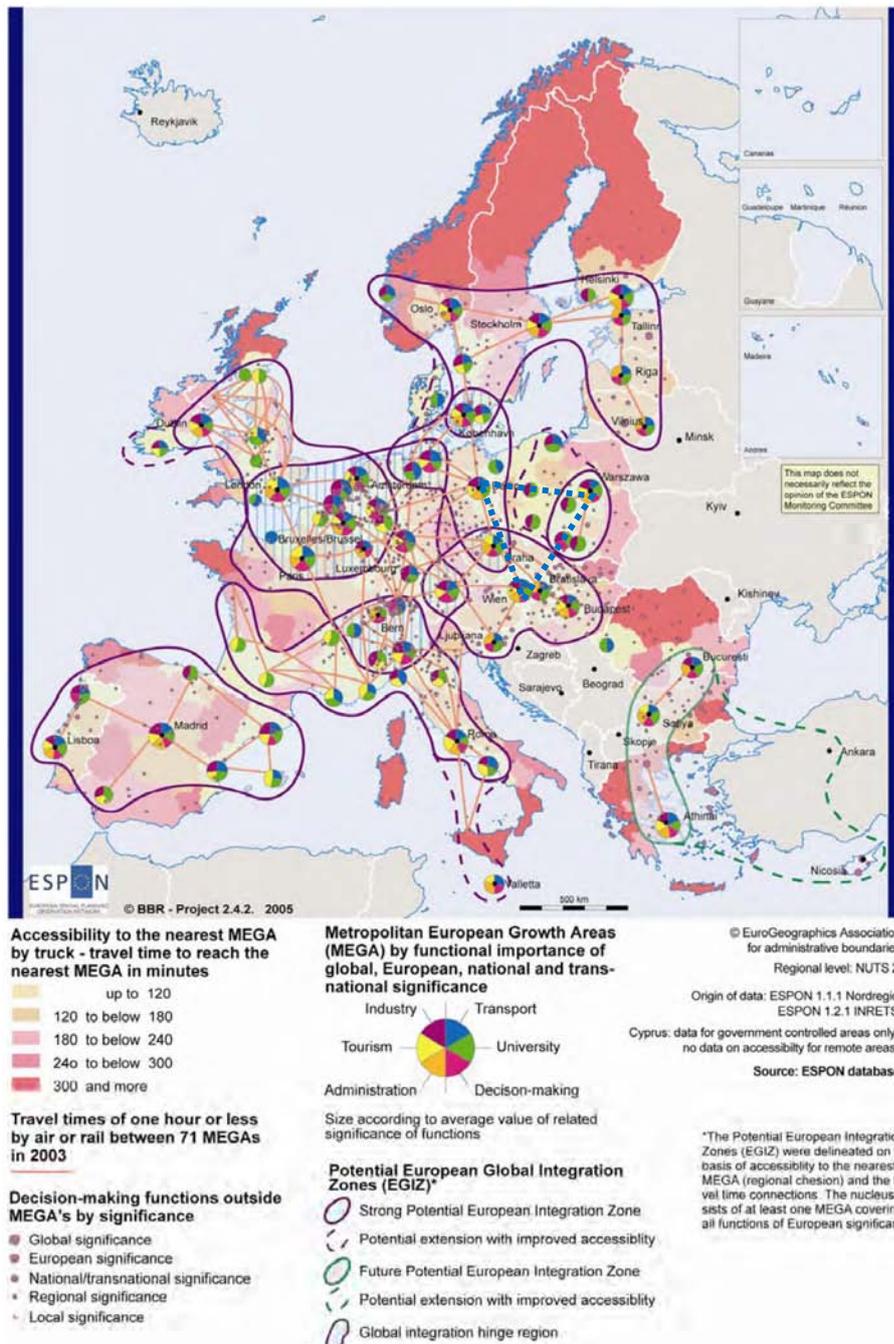
PUSH delimitation: RRG  
PIA identification: Nordregio

Source: ESPON 2006 Project 1.1.1. 2005a: 16

The discussion on polycentric patterns of spatial development, as initiated by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (CSD 1999) focused on identifying emerging ‘global economic integration zones’ that could provide a balance to the dominant core area, called the ‘Pentagon’ and defined by London, Hamburg, Munich, Milan and Paris, and thus strengthen the economic competitiveness of the EU as a whole. Based on earlier ESPON results, project 2.4.2 identified such global integration zones which covered functional connections and sufficient connectivity between the centres (defined by travel time by air or rail of one hour or less), as well as issues related to accessibility (expressed through trade relations by truck) and inner-regional cohesion. Figure 11 shows the results of this analysis (ESPON 2006 project 2.4.2). Nine potential global integration zones have been identified, including a ‘Danube zone’ (defined by Munich, Prague, Budapest, Ljubljana and

Vienna), and an 'Eastern central zone' between Copenhagen / Malmö, Berlin, Prague and Bremen. Due to low connectivity to the east, the project report notes that this zone is still predominantly west-oriented. The project report further identifies a 'Polish zone' around Warsaw and Katowice, but notes that this zone is still quite isolated and limited in its extension. Realising the potential of these identified 'zones' will significantly depend on improved accessibility between the different cities.

**Figure 11:** Global integration zones as defined by ESPON 2006 project 2.4.2



📍 'Triangle of Central Europe' as identified in ESPON 2006 project 3.1

Source: ESPON 2006 project 2.4.2 2006: 7

Moreover, what is notable, and of particular relevance for the discussion in this report, is that the identified zones overlap and also have interrelations among each other. For the zones in the Central European space, such a 'hinge function' has been identified for the area around Prague and Dresden, connecting the 'Eastern central' and the 'Danube' zones (ESPON 2006 project 2.4.2 2006: 8-9). In another ESPON study, ESPON 2006 project 3.1 (ESPON 2006, 2005b), the potential for a 'Triangle of Central Europe' between Warsaw, Berlin and Vienna, was further identified, as a region with growth potential and good connections with the 'Pentagon', the wider Balkan area and the Baltic states, but also facing the challenges of old industrial regions. In relation to the current 'macro-regional map' of Europe and the such identified cooperation and development spaces (Figure 1), it is noticeable that while the 'Danube zone' and 'Eastern central zone' correlate with the EU macro-regional strategies for the Danube region and the Baltic Sea region respectively, the 'Polish zone' and especially the identified 'Triangle of Central Europe' falls in between the such identified macro-regional spaces, further emphasising the 'hinge function' between the regional seas (and surrounding cooperation spaces) to the North and South. The EU discussion about macro-regions, especially in relation to the ESDP's concepts of polycentric development and global economic integration zones, is based on the assumption that for a macro-region to function as a coherent space, strong economic and transport links between the regions and cities within this space are required. The current situation in Central Europe is such that economic links might be strong between some of the cities of Central Europe but not necessarily across the entire region, and that there are considerable gaps in the transport network, notably in relation to rail infrastructure. Considerable investments in European transport connections are proposed under the Trans-European Transport Network policy of the EU (see next section), which might contribute to strengthening the 'Triangle of Central Europe' and its connections to other regions.

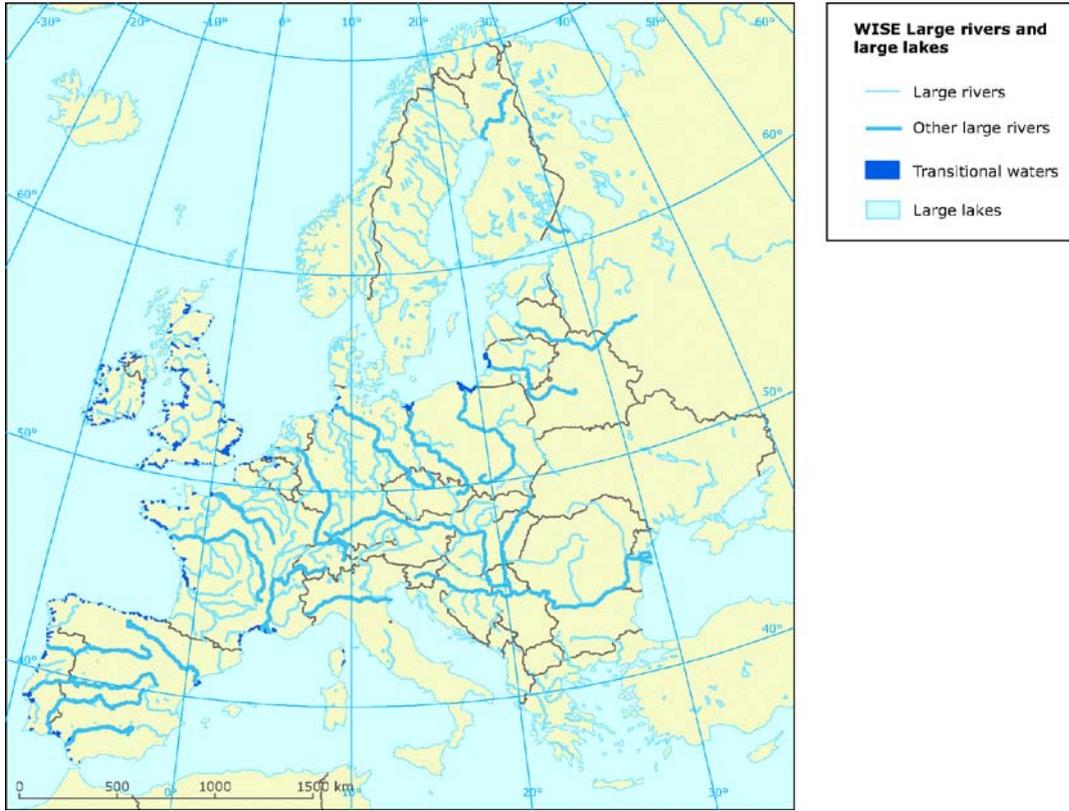
## **5. EU 'spatial policies' with alternative meta-geographies**

There are an increasing number of EU policies that promote an alternative view on European space and require cooperation across national borders for their implementation. Some of these, notably the EU Water Framework Directive, the EU's Trans-European Transport Network, and the EU's energy infrastructure policy, will be discussed below in relation to their identification of 'cooperation spaces' and 'corridors' of relevance to Central Europe.

### *EU water policy*

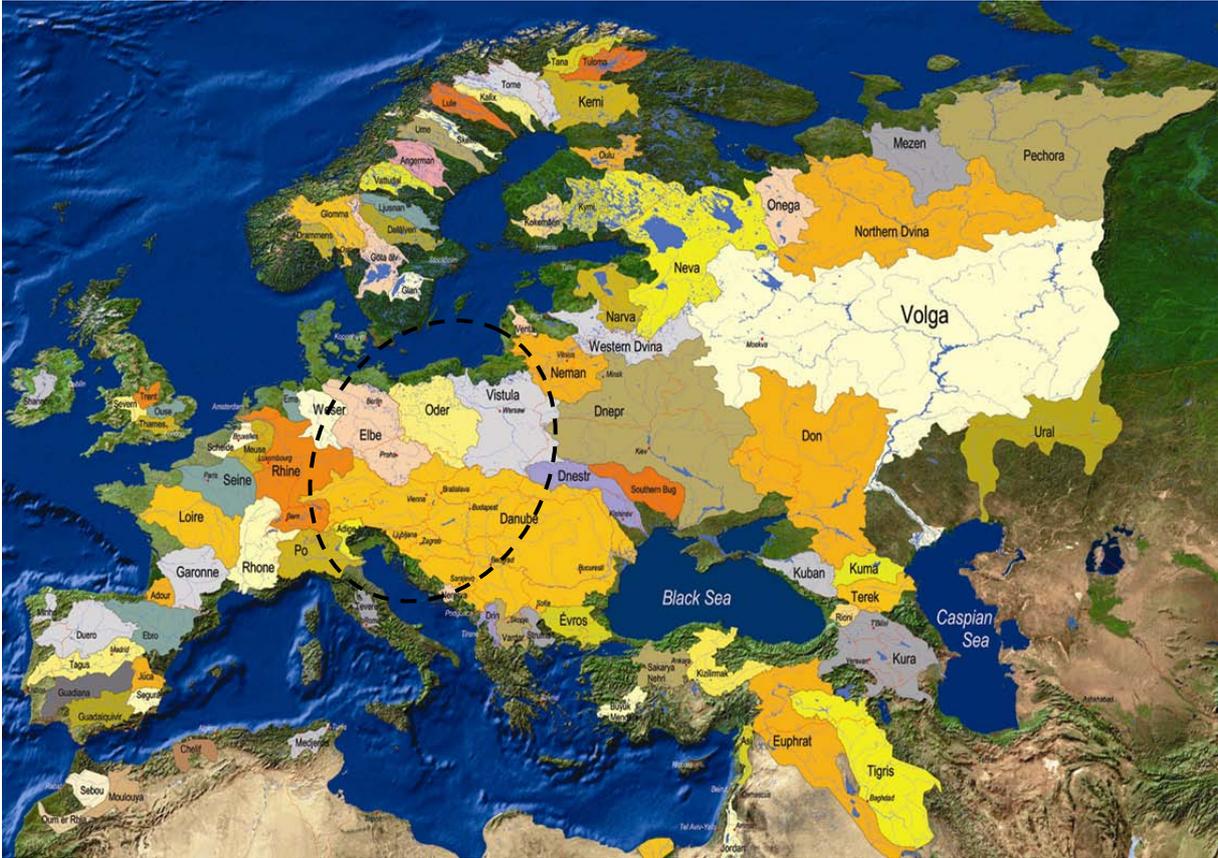
The EU Water Framework Directive, adopted in 2000, requires a single system of water management for all rivers in the Union (Figure 12). The policy is based on a river basin management approach, focusing on river catchments, rather than administrative or political boundaries. Constituent countries have to jointly prepare a river basin management plan and coordinate their measures in the catchment area. Aside from the Danube catchment area, the Elbe, Oder and Vistula are other large transboundary rivers in the Central European space (Figure 13).

**Figure 12:** Large rivers and lakes in Europe



Source: European Environment Agency (<http://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/figures/wise-large-rivers-and-large-lakes>)

**Figure 13:** EU Water Framework Directive and national and international river basin districts



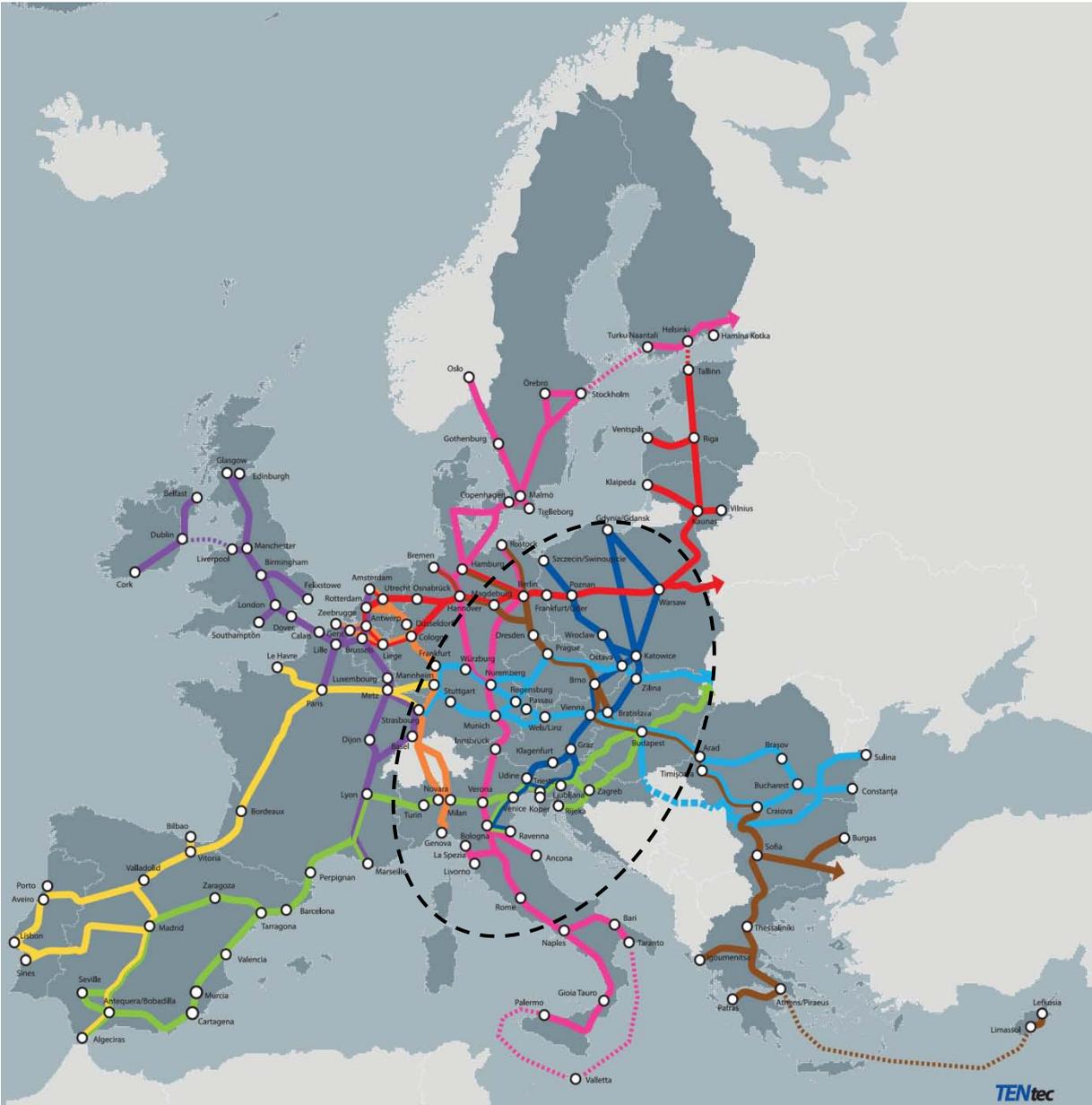
Source: [http://www.wfd-croatia.eu/userfiles/image/photogallery/maps/RB\\_Europe.png](http://www.wfd-croatia.eu/userfiles/image/photogallery/maps/RB_Europe.png)

*EU transport infrastructure policy*

Since the early 1990s, the European Community has pursued a transport, energy and telecommunications infrastructure policy focused on ‘priority axes’ to support the implementation of the single market by ensuring efficient infrastructure networks. The EU’s transport infrastructure policy focuses on improved inter-regional connections, across the entire continent between East and West, North and South (Figure 14). While the implementation of the EU transport infrastructure policy does not require transboundary governance arrangements (as the WFD does), the TEN-T projects nevertheless demand cooperation between countries and regions along the corridor for their planning and implementation across national borders. Moreover, the scale of these projects in terms of investment and socio-economic and environmental impacts, and the association with wider economic objectives as a consequence of the improved connections mean that they are an important consideration for wider spatial development strategies. Of the nine proposed priority axes of the TEN-T core network (Figure 14), seven are of relevance to the Central European Space and will be briefly described in the following<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/index_en.htm)

**Figure 14:** The EU's Trans-European Transport Network: TEN-T Connecting Europe



- BALTIC - ADRIATIC
- NORTH SEA - BALTIC
- MEDITERRANEAN
- ORIENT / EAST-MED
- SCANDINAVIAN - MEDITERRANEAN
- RHINE - ALPINE
- ATLANTIC
- NORTH SEA - MEDITERRANEAN
- RHINE - DANUBE

Source: European Commission, DG Mobility and Transport  
 ([http://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/index_en.htm))

TEN-T core network axes with a predominantly North-South orientation:

The Baltic-Adriatic Corridor (dark blue in Figure 14), from the Polish ports Gdansk and Gdynia and from Szczecin and Swinoujscie via Czech Republic or Slovakia and through eastern Austria to the Slovenian port of Koper and to the Italian ports of Trieste, Venice and Ravenna. It covers rail, road, airports, ports and rail-road terminals (RRT's). The key projects are the Semmering base tunnel and the Koralm railway Graz – Klagenfurt in Austria.

The Orient/East-Med Corridor (brown colour in Figure 14), connecting the German ports of Bremen, Hamburg and Rostock via Czech Republic and Slovakia, with a branch through Austria, further via Hungary to ports in Romania and Bulgaria, with links to Turkey and Greece. It comprises rail, road, airports, ports, RRT's and the Elbe river inland waterway.

The Scandinavian-Mediterranean Corridor (pink in Figure 14) from the Finnish-Russian border via a "Motorway of the Sea" connection to Stockholm and with a branch from Oslo, through southern Sweden, Denmark, Germany, where the ports of Bremen, Hamburg and Rostock are connected, western Austria to Italy and "Motorway of the Sea" links to Malta. It comprises rail, road, airports, ports, RRT's and "Motorway of the Sea" sections. The key projects are the Fehmarnbelt fixed link and the Brenner base tunnel.

The Rhine-Alpine Corridor (orange in Figure 14), connecting the North Sea ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam and Amsterdam along the Rhine valley via Basel to Milan and the Italian port of Genova. It covers rail, road, airports, ports, RRT's and the Rhine as inland waterway. The key projects are the Alpine base tunnels Gotthard and Lötschberg and their access lines.

TEN-T core network axes with a predominantly East-West orientation:

The Mediterranean corridor (light green in Figure 14), from Southern Spain through France, Northern Italy, Slovenia and a branch via Croatia to Hungary and the Ukrainian border. It covers rail and road, airports, ports, RRT's and, in Northern Italy, also the Po river inland waterway.

The Rhine-Danube Corridor (light blue in Figure 14), connecting Strasbourg and Mannheim via two parallel axes in southern Germany, one along the Main and Danube, the other one via Stuttgart and Munich, and with a branch to Prague and Zilina to the Slovak-Ukrainian border, through Austria, Slovakia and Hungary to the Romanian ports of Constanta and Galati. It covers rail, road, airports, ports, RRT's and the inland waterway system of Main, Main-Danube Canal, the entire Danube downstream of Kelheim and the Sava river.

The North Sea-Baltic Corridor (red in Figure 14) from the North Sea ports Antwerp, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Bremen and Hamburg through Poland to the Belarus border and to the Baltic countries' ports and Helsinki. It covers rail, road, airports, ports, RRT's, inland waterway as the "Mittelland Kanal" and "Motorway of the Sea" links to Finland. The key project is "Rail Baltic(a)", a railway link between north-eastern Poland, Kaunas, Riga and Tallinn.

### *EU energy infrastructure policy*

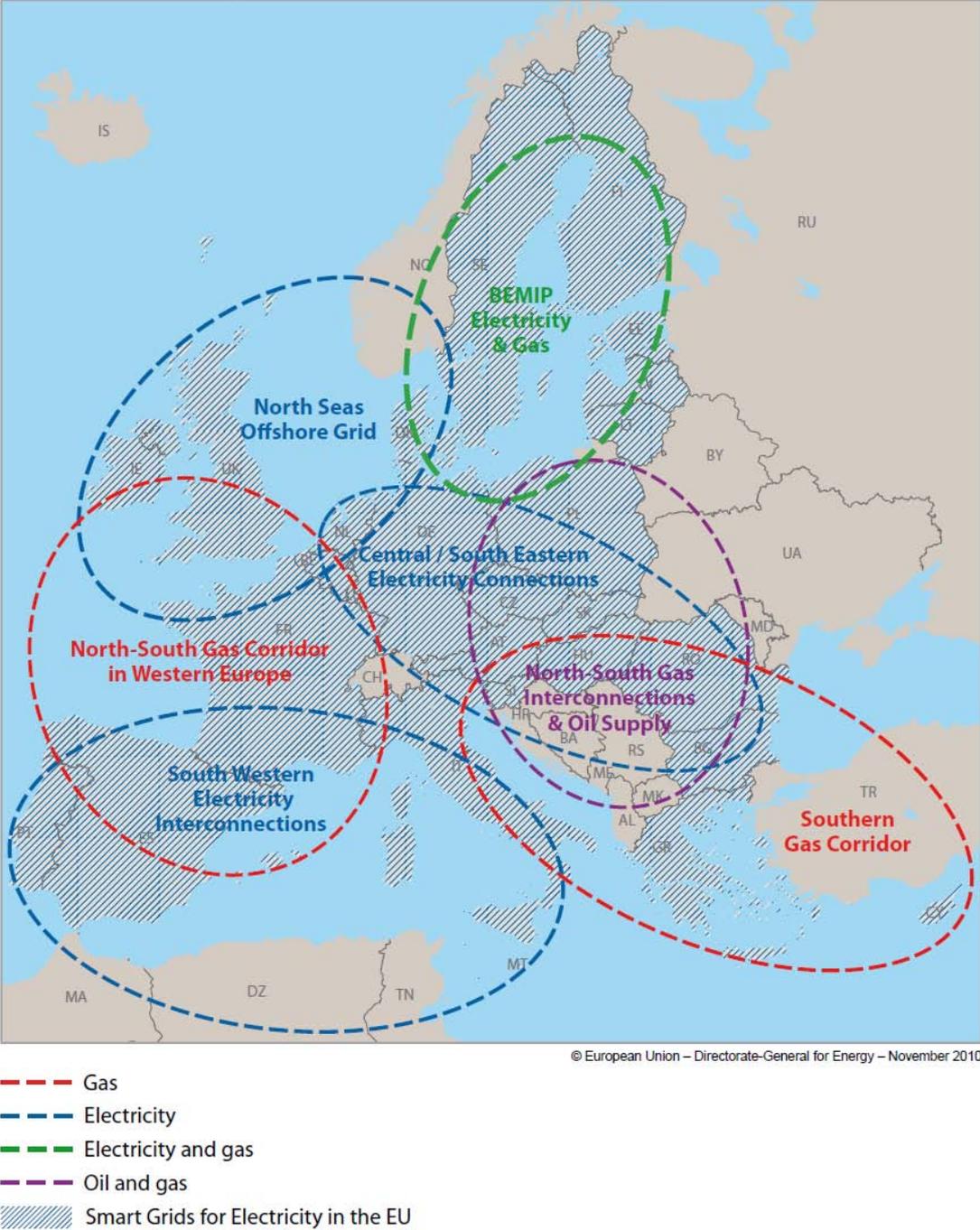
The European energy infrastructure has become a focus of EU policy over the past years in relation to the Union's climate change and energy objectives for 2020, known as "20-20-20" targets<sup>5</sup>, and with a view to increasing the EU's energy independence and ensuring security of supply. Priority projects for a modernisation of the EU's energy infrastructure have been agreed, with a focus on EU-wide

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<sup>5</sup> The „20-20-20“ targets refer to the following objectives: A 20% reduction in EU greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels; raising the share of EU energy consumption produced from renewable resources to 20%; and a 20% improvement in the EU's energy efficiency.

priorities. Nine priority corridors have been identified (see Figure 15), and three priority thematic areas agreed (smart grids deployment, electricity highways, cross-border CO<sub>2</sub> network).

**Figure 15:** EU priority corridors for electricity, gas and oil



Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Energy 2011: 22

Of the priority corridors, three vitally affect the Central European space, which is characterised by missing interconnectors and pipeline connections along the former Iron Curtain and which includes several land-locked countries where reliable energy supply is a key priority (EC 2011b):

North-South electricity interconnections in Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe, with a focus on electricity interconnections and internal lines in North- South and East-West directions to complete the internal market and integrate generation from renewable energy sources. Key actions proposed include new interconnections between Hungary and Slovakia, and between Germany and the Czech Republic, and capacity increases between Germany and Austria, and Poland and Germany.

North-South gas interconnections in Eastern Europe, with a focus on regional gas connections between the Baltic Sea region, the Adriatic and the Aegean Seas and the Black Sea. The aim is to ensure that the CEE region would become less vulnerable to a supply cut through the Russia/Ukraine/Belarus route. The declaration of the extended Visegrád group<sup>6</sup> (discussed below) expressed already a clear commitment within the region to tackle these challenges. Key actions include interconnection upgrades between Czech Republic and Poland, and new interconnections between Slovakia and Hungary, and between Slovenia, Italy and Austria.

Oil supply connections in Central Eastern Europe, with a focus on interoperability of the oil pipeline network in Central Eastern Europe to increase security of supply and reduce environmental risks. The aim is to create a 'Central Eastern European Oil Pipeline Ring' by establishing links between the North and South Druzhba pipelines both in the West and the East and thereby granting access to the Baltic, Black and the Adriatic Seas. Key actions include a pipeline between Germany and the Czech Republic and a pipeline in Poland to link the Northern and Southern branch of the Druzhba pipeline system, and a new pipeline between Austria and Slovakia.

While the EU policies for river (water) management, transport and energy infrastructure corridors discussed here have clear spatial implications and for their successful implementation require cooperation between countries and regions, the 'map' that arises from such cooperation needs is one of different sub-spaces and development corridors within or including Central Europe, rather than a policy focus on Central Europe as a whole. However, EU-funding for transnational cooperation under the Cohesion Policy requires the formulation of a joint strategy for the cooperation areas and region-specific programme objectives to guide the development of transnational projects that are of relevance to the specific area. In the following section, therefore, the 'INTERREG' programme documents for the transnational cooperation region of Central Europe are reviewed for the identified priorities for cooperation in this space.

## **6. Transnational territorial cooperation in Central Europe 2007-2013 (INTERREG IVB) and 2014-2020 (INTERREG VB)**

The European Union has provided financial support for transnational territorial cooperation since 1997, complementing Community funding for cross-border cooperation that was set up already in 1990. In the context of the preparation of the 'European Spatial Development Perspective' (ESDP) (CSD 1999), large transnational programme regions were defined to support cooperation on spatial development in order to encourage 'new ways of thinking about spatial prospects which are not limited by national boundaries' (CEC 1994: 169). Starting as a Community Initiative, territorial cooperation (,INTERREG') has since 2007 become one of the main objectives of EU Cohesion Policy. While the definition of large transnational regions, as compared to the smaller cross-border regions,

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<sup>6</sup> See the Declaration of the Budapest V4+ Energy Security Summit of 24 February, 2010 (<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/>). V4+ countries, in the sense of the Declaration, are: the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Poland (as Member States of the Visegrád Group), the Republic of Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Bulgaria, the Republic of Croatia, the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Slovenia and Romania.

suggests a cooperation agenda focused on those issues of relevance to large parts of the cooperation area, the concept of 'transnationality' was not clearly defined when the first INTERREG IIC initiative was launched in 1997. As a consequence, different programme regions have interpreted it – and the resulting requirements for determining whether projects are eligible for INTERREG funding - differently (Dühr et al. 2010). One commonly used argument for defining 'transnationality' is by taking the principle of subsidiarity as a point of departure. Subsidiarity implies that issues to be addressed at transnational scale should be those which cannot be adequately tackled at a lower level of scale, but require an 'uploading' to a higher level and consequently cooperation between different countries. Therefore, the issues to be addressed in transnational cooperation programmes ('INTERREG B') should arguably be of greater and more strategic relevance than those addressed in 'INTERREG A' cross-border programmes which concern smaller cooperation spaces of regions directly adjacent to a national border. Reviews of projects funded under 'INTERREG IIIB', however, have shown that besides projects focusing on such transnational issues, a considerable number of funded projects focus on issues of common concern, where cooperation may be desirable but is not necessary to address the issues effectively (Panteia et al. 2010; Dühr et al. 2010).

Identifying projects of transnational relevance has not been helped by the delineation of the cooperation spaces which were frequently driven by political interests to belong to programmes eligible for EU funding, rather than the acknowledgement of shared spatial development challenges. Some of the transnational INTERREG programmes were originally defined on the basis of studies of European 'action areas' (Robert et al. 2001) and analyses of the European Commission (CEC 1991, 1994) to identify common spatial characteristics outside of the restrictions of national borders. However, several of the original areas were expanded as a consequence of political lobbying, and other cooperation spaces – notably those including Central and Eastern European member states - was largely based on political motives to foster European integration by providing incentives for cooperation across national borders rather than a clear spatial rationale (Dühr et al. 2010). In particular the transnational cooperation programmes along the Eastern EU border have been subject to far-reaching adjustments over the past programming periods as a response to accession of new EU members and the political goal to further EU integration between East and West along the former Iron Curtain. Such changes affect not only the management of the transnational funding programmes, but also require a discursive process with actors in the region to time and again identify the transnational rationale of the region and the key transnational projects that would benefit its cohesion and further development. Notably the transnational region of the very large former CADSES<sup>7</sup> INTERREG IIIB programme (2000-2006) and (following the division of CADSES into two programmes) that of the Central Europe INTERREG IVB programme (2007-2013) were – aside from a shared industrial tradition – arguably not based on a strong transnational rationale of a cohesive space.

Even so, under the CADSES programme two consecutive projects were funded which aimed at providing a platform for networking of spatial planning institutions in the region and to identify key spatial development issues for cooperation in the transnational region. The INTERREG IIC project 'VISION PLANET' resulted in a spatial vision document that was published by the participating project partners in 2000 (BBR 2000). Drawing on the policy principles of the ESDP (CSD 1999), VISION PLANET focused on five fields of activity: improving the spatial structure, shaping the development of settlements and cities, transforming rural areas, developing transport and communication, and protecting the environment and managing the natural and cultural heritage. The document identified six 'sub-spaces' (see Figures 16 and 17) that share commonalities, and which are considered particularly crucial in determining the future path of integration and development of the large transnational CADSES region (BBR 2000: 51-53). These sub-spaces are:

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<sup>7</sup> CADSES stands for: Central Adriatic Danubian South-East Space.

In the 2007-2013 Structural Funds period, the former CADSES transnational cooperation area was divided into two partly overlapping spaces: Central Europe and South East Europe (see Figure 18).

The Central European Interaction Area of those regions along the then (in 2000, before Eastern EU enlargement) external EU borders where the effects of EU enlargement were expected to be felt strongly.

The Adriatic Sea region, the Danubian Co-operation zone and the Black Sea cooperation area, partly overlapping with the other areas, which are characterized by common transportation issues, environmental problems, natural and cultural heritage, and tourism and economic potential. The seas and waterways were seen as lending themselves to international co-operation, which in some form already existed. Cooperation in the CADSES area was however envisaged to provide a more comprehensive framework for their further development.

The area of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, comprising territories both directly and indirectly affected by conflicts on the Balkan. Transnational spatial development cooperation was seen as an indispensable contribution towards the implementation of the goals of the Stability Pact.

The Carpathian Development Region in the Eastern part of the CADSES region, seen as the frontier region of the EU for the time to come and comprising less developed regions of the then accession countries (the Eastern borders of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania) and third countries (Ukraine and Moldova).

**Figure 16:** VISION Planet – Transnational development areas for future actions I



Source: BBR 2000: 52

**Figure 17:** VISION Planet – Transnational development areas for future actions II



Source: BBR 2000: 53

The follow-up project of ‘VISION Planet’ under INTERREG IIIB, entitled a ‘Planners Network for Central and South-East Europe’ (PlaNet CenSE) was between 2003 and 2007 aimed at increasing the common understanding among 25 project partners from 15 countries about spatial development issues of relevance to the transnational scale. The project resulted in a strategic document entitled ‘Mobilizing Central and South-East Europe: Chances, Challenges and Choices for Future Development’ (2006), and the establishment of a Forum for Territorial Impact Analysis (TIA). TIA was tested as a planning instrument on transnational level in two pilot projects: ‘Metropolitan Networks in Central and South-East Europe (MetroNet)’ which analysed the polycentric potential of the transnational region in order to assess the emergence of a possible new “global economic integration zone” as suggested by the ESPD; and a study on ‘North-South Rail Corridors’ which highlighted the strategic significance of north-south infrastructure projects from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea,

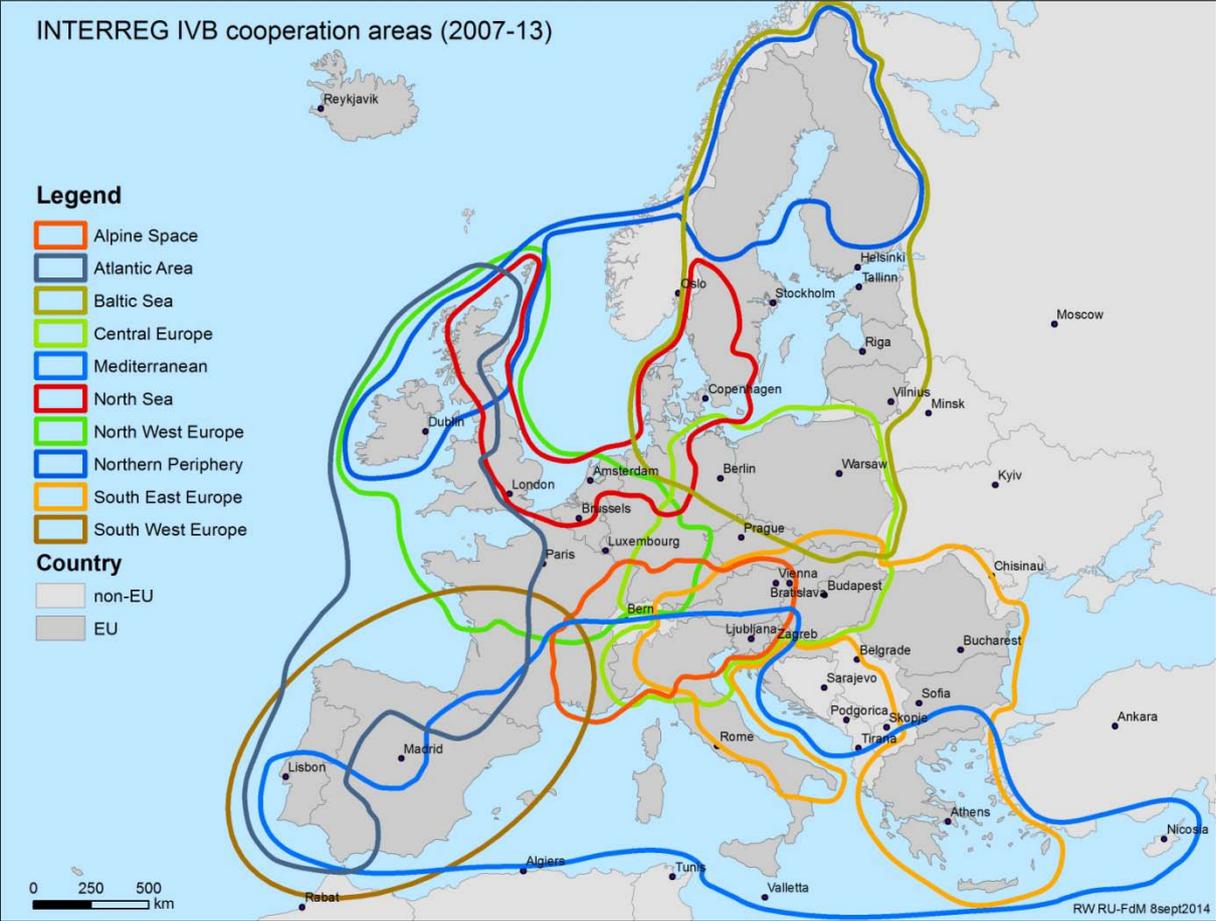
complementing the then dominant focus on east-west connections. The project concluded that there is currently:

‘no coherent Central European growth region. Central Europe is characterized by considerable internal disparities and by a strong clustering of similarities with bordering regions. However, as a result, it may be concluded that it makes sense to keep the planning vision of a new global economic integration zone alive as a useful orientation for spatial policy strategies for CenSE [Central and Southern Europe]. This assessment is justified by the leading position of the Metropolitan Growth Areas (MEGAs) of the Central European Triangle within the ranking according to the indicators representing the Lisbon Performance. The MEGAs may build the corner stones of the Central European Triangle (Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest) by serving as engines for a development towards such a vision’ (Tatzberger and Schindegger 2008: 79).

For the potential of such a Central European growth region to come to fruition, the report highlighted the importance of improved north-south rail connections.

With the EU Cohesion Policy period 2007-2013, INTERREG became one of the mainstream objectives, and rather than being guided by the spatial planning perspective of the ESDP as the previous programmes were, was oriented towards achieving the EU’s jobs and growth objectives as set out in the Lisbon-Gothenburg strategy. For INTERREG IVB (2007-2013), there were 13 transnational cooperation programmes, of which ten were located on the European continent (see Figure 18).

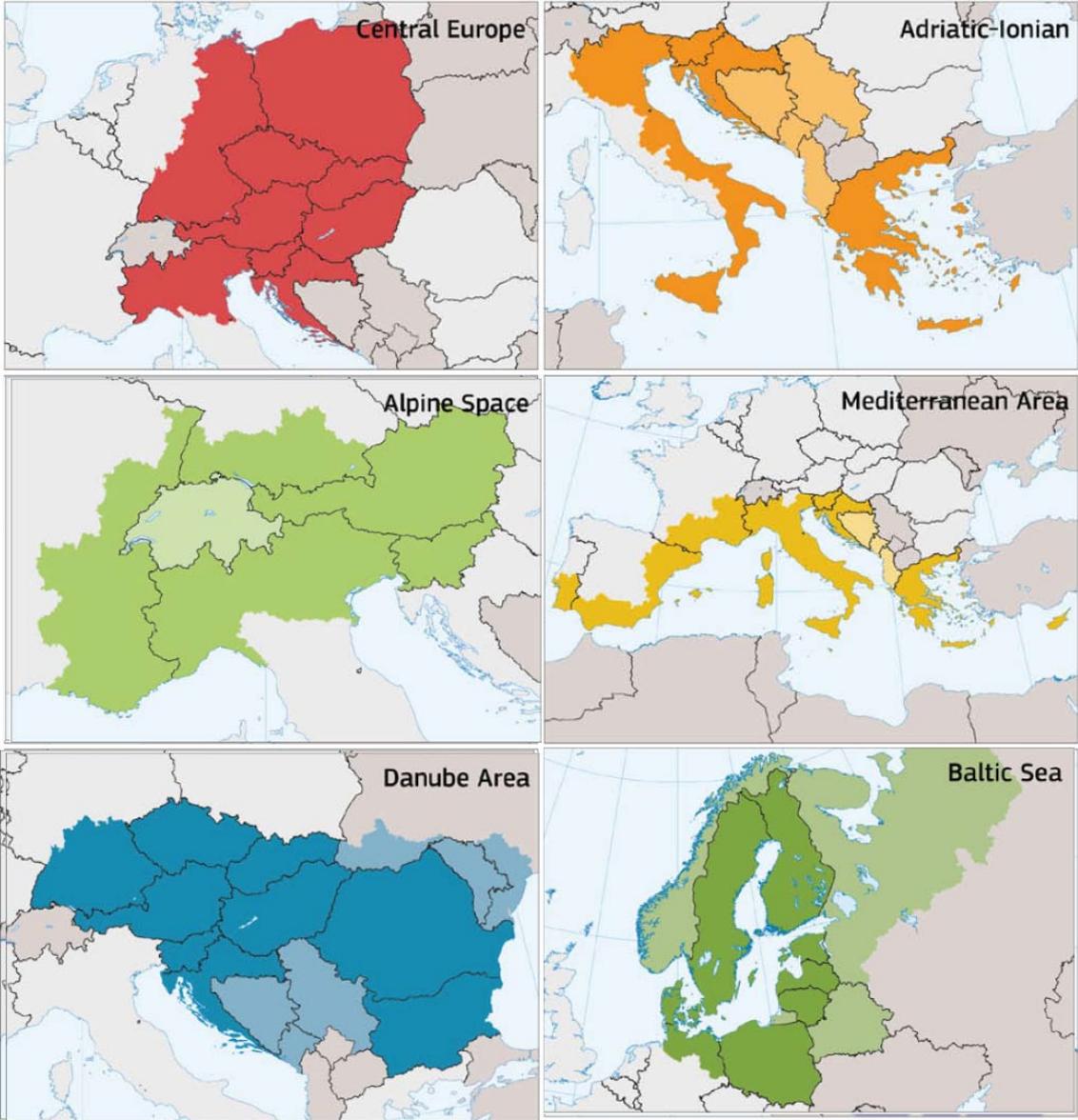
**Figure 18:** EU Cohesion Policy 2007-2013: Transnational territorial cooperation (‘INTERREG IVB’)



Source: European Commission, Visualisation: S. Dühr and R. Wunderink

For the funding period 2014-2020, altogether 15 large cooperation spaces have been defined for the transnational programmes (of which 12 are located on the European continent and 3 concern overseas territories). The Central Europe programme for the 2014-2020 funding period now also covers Croatia as a new EU member state (Figure 19). The former South East Europe programme has been divided into a Balkan-Mediterranean, an Adriatic-Ionian cooperation programme and a Danube region programme, of which the last two correspond to the respective territories covered by EU macro-regional strategies (EC 2014b). These cooperation programmes (and the EU macro-regional strategies for these regions) partly overlap with each other, and also share regions with the programme area covered by the 'Central Europe' programme (see Figure 19). While a map of partly overlapping 'soft spaces' may more realistically reflect functional interdependencies than neatly stacked administrative-territorial units of nation-states and sub-national authorities would, such overlapping cooperation spaces will arguably present difficult tests for the political priorities for cooperation of the participating actors, whereby the most critical concerns are likely going to receive greatest attention.

**Figure 19:** Six of the fifteen transnational territorial cooperation areas ('INTERREG VB') of relevance to Central Europe, 2014-2020



Source: EC 2014b: 256-257

The Operational Programmes that are prepared for each territorial cooperation programme have to set out the transnational strategy for the cooperating countries and regions, and are expected to identify the key issues for their transnational area on which cooperation is needed or desirable. In the following, the Operational Programmes for Central Europe region for the EU Cohesion Policy funding period 2007-2013 (INTERREG IVB) and 2014-2020 (INTERREG VB) are analysed with a view to summarizing their definition of the key transnational issues for cooperation (and the underlying rationale for the transnational region or sub-spaces within the programme area).

The Central Europe programme 2007-2013 (INTERREG IVB) included all or parts of eight EU member states (Czech Republic, parts of Germany, parts of Italy, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Slovenia and Slovak Republic) and one permanent observer (Ukraine) (Figure 20). As compared to the former and very diverse CADSES region, the Central Europe programme is smaller, but with approximately 148 million inhabitants was still one of the largest INTERREG IVB programme areas. The programming document highlights the considerable diversity of the cooperation area and the continuing economic disparities between West and East, but argues that ‘the great diversity is a strategic key factor for the development of the area and should be used to strengthen sustainable economic growth and territorial cohesion. The main characteristic of the programme region and the challenges can be described by a need for reducing economic and social disparities by intensifying integration, reaching harmonised efficiency and quality standards, deepening existing and growing institutional networks, as well as cooperation and capacity building’ (Central Europe programme 2012: 9).

Given the changes to the programme area and management, the continuation of the previous programme is more intermittent than for other INTERREG programmes where framework conditions (including the delineation of the eligible area) remained stable. Building on past experiences with cooperation, improving the actions and intensifying the integration process are stated as the main intentions for the programme. Given the diversity of the cooperation area, the programme focus is on territorial cohesion, internal integration and competitiveness (Figure 21). The overall programme goals and the strategic approach were pursued through four thematic priorities:

*Priority 1 – Facilitating Innovation across Central Europe* – aimed at improving the framework conditions for innovation and building up the capabilities to transfer and apply innovation.

*Priority 2 – Improving Accessibility of and within Central Europe* – aimed at improving the interconnectivity and intermodality of transport across the cooperation area.

*Priority 3 – Using our Environment Responsibly* – to develop a high quality environment by managing natural resources and heritage, by reducing risks and impacts of natural and man-made hazards.

*Priority 4 – Enhancing Competitiveness and Attractiveness of Cities and Regions* – to promote polycentric settlement structures and to address the effects of demographic and social change on urban and regional development.

With these priorities, the Central Europe Operational Programme for 2007-2013 responds clearly to the aims of the Lisbon-Gothenburg Strategy and the corresponding objectives set out in the ‘Community Strategic Guidelines for Cohesion’ (Council 2006). However, the document remains rather general in relation to identifying the key transnational issues on which cooperation would be required in the Central European space, and does not convincingly translate the generic EU objectives into region-specific priorities and actions. As required by the ERDF Regulation for this funding period (EU 2006), each Operational Programme had to submit an indicative list of major projects that are of strategic relevance for the cooperation area. The Central Europe programme does not include a list of the strategic projects expected, but merely states that targeted calls might be launched to stimulate the preparation of such more strategic initiatives.

While the Central Europe programme may not be too different to several other INTERREG IVB programmes in facing difficulties with translating EU objectives into region-specific priorities, the result has been that most projects funded focused on issues of common concern, or of relevance only to cross-border spaces (such as CENTROPE), rather than addressing truly transnational issues that would require cooperation at this level of scale. Those projects funded under INTERREG IVB Central Europe that were of more strategic relevance to the transnational region as a whole focused on:

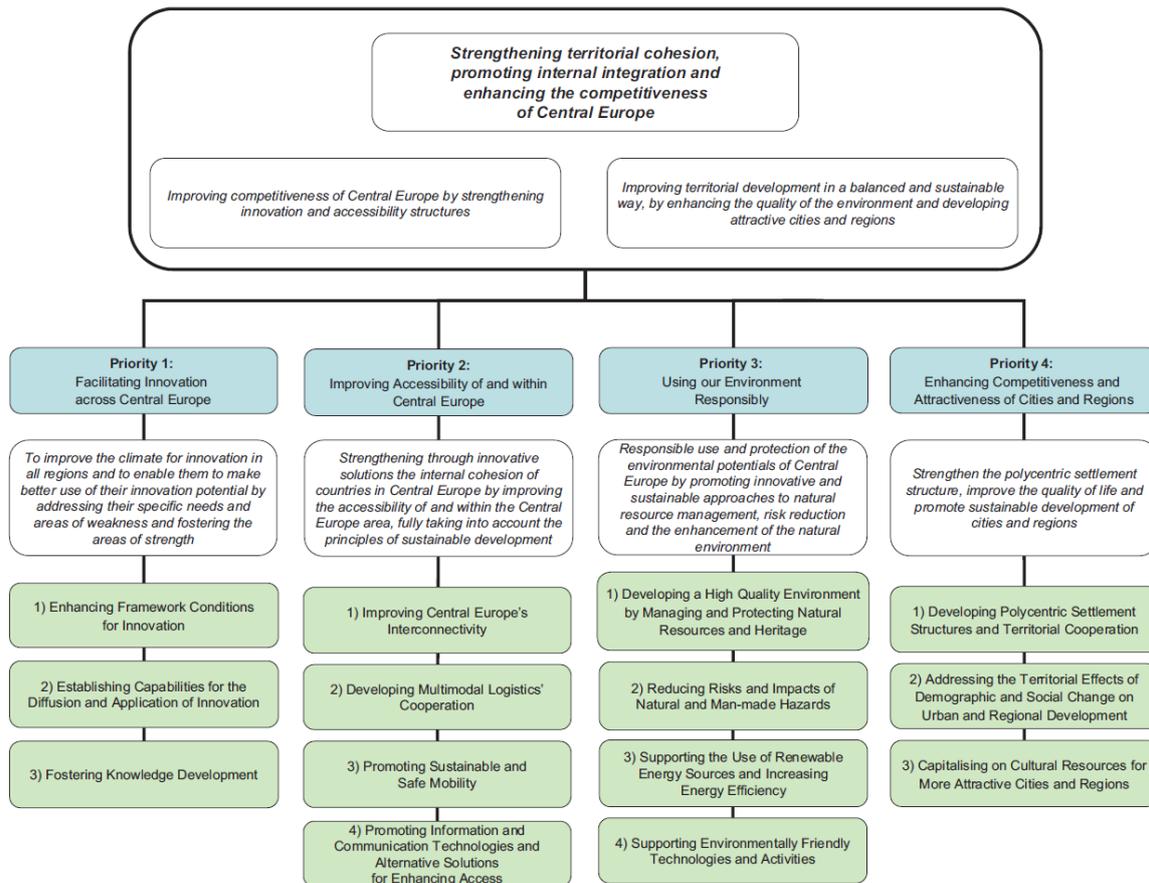
- corridor development around major transport infrastructure axes (e.g. SouthNorthAxis - SONORA project, on multimodal accessibility along South-North connections within Central Europe area; Baltic-Adriatic Transport Cooperation BATCo project, aimed at improving economic development along the Baltic-Adriatic Transport Corridor and on ensuring environmentally-friendly development);
- transnational ecological networks (e.g. TransEcoNet project, which aims at developing and managing transnational ecological networks in Central Europe), and
- flood management around the larger rivers in the region (e.g. Adaptation to flood risk in the Labe-Elbe river basin – LABEL project).

**Figure 20:** Programme area INTERREG IVB (2007-2013) Central Europe



Source: Central Europe programme 2012: 8

**Figure 21:** Programme goal and objective tree: Central Europe Programme 2007-2013



Source: Central Europe programme 2012: 40

At the time of writing of this report, the draft of the Central Europe 2020 programme (July 2014 version) was published. It again emphasises the highly heterogeneous nature of the programme area in geographical terms (including coastal areas, mountain ranges, rural areas, large urban agglomerations, etc.) as well as in economic and social terms (with a still visible east-west divide). The programme area for the 2014-2020 funding period after accession of Croatia to the EU now covers nine EU member states, including all regions from Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, as well as eight *Länder* from Germany and nine regions from Italy (Figure 22). In the programming document (Central Europe Programme 2014), there is more emphasis on governance and capacity-building than in the previous version to facilitate joint responses, but the programme goal and priorities for funding again remain rather general in response to EU2020 goals (EC 2010d) and the 'Common Strategic Framework of Cohesion Policy' (EU 2013b) (see Figure 23). Of the 11 thematic objectives (TOs) defined in the regulatory framework for the EU cohesion policy programming period 2014-2020 (Article 9 of the Common Provisions Regulation (EU2013b)), the draft programme refers to the following four TOs which were translated into four priority axes:

- Strengthening research, technological development and innovation (TO 1)
- Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors (TO 4)
- Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency (TO 6)
- Promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures (TO 7).

Transnationality is defined weakly in the cooperation programme document, and largely as cooperation on issues of common concern, expressed as ‘the integration of the following principles: to ensure joint project development, management, financing and implementation; to address topics of shared interest and common benefit; to develop transferable results which can be applied by various actors and territories’ (Central Europe programme 2014: 137). Consequently, of the identified investment priorities the majority likely refers to cooperation on common issues (e.g. cooperation on low carbon strategies, decontaminating brownfield sites), rather than on issues of key strategic relevance to the transnational region (Figure 23). Although the ETC Regulation (EU 2013a) foresees ‘a list of major projects for which the implementation is planned during the programming period’ (point (e) of Article 8(2)), there are no proposals for strategic projects included in the draft Operational Programme.

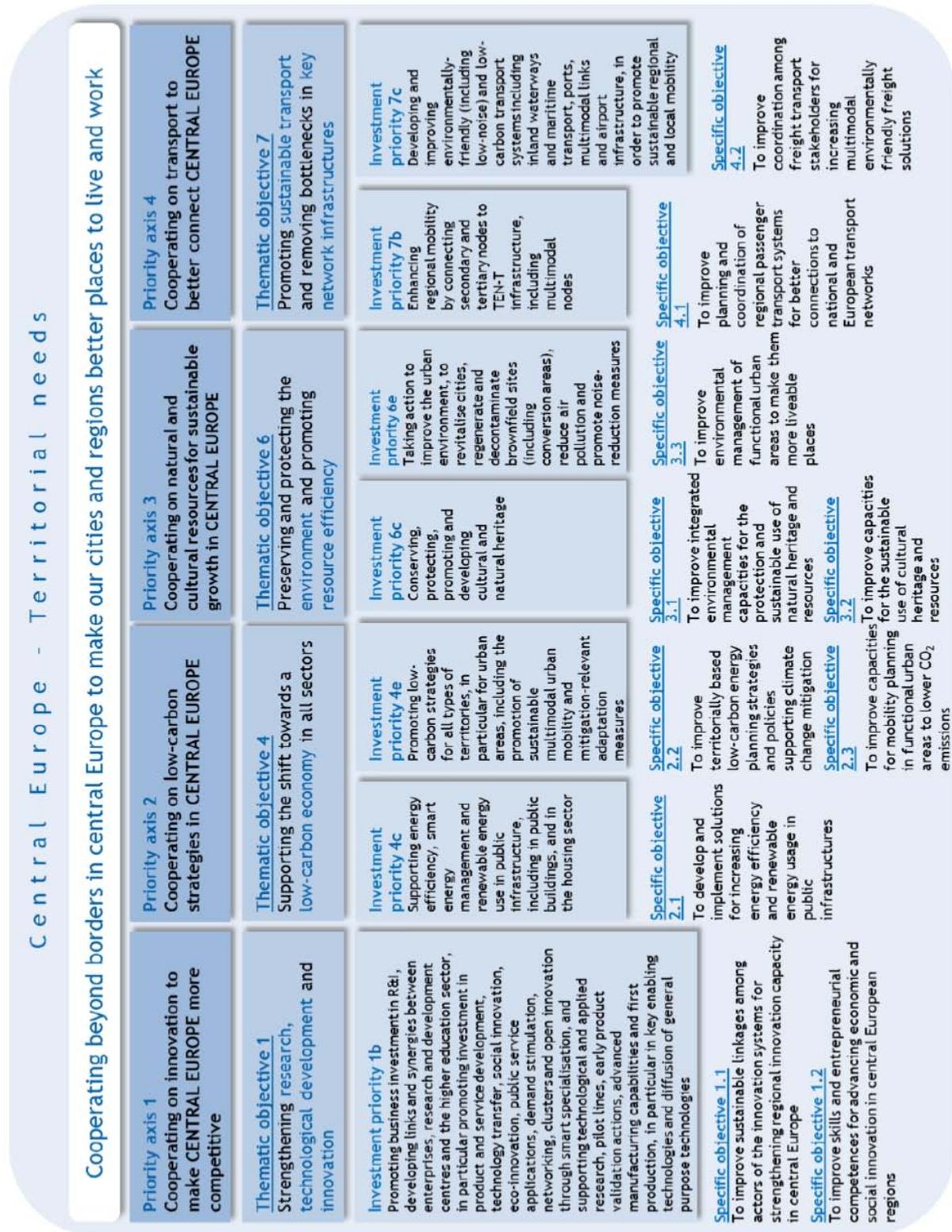
In terms of the purposes of this report, thus, the INTERREG programming documents for Central Europe offer little by way of clarifying the transnational rationale of the region and the key strategic issues for cooperation that would arise in this area. Rather, the cooperation programme seems to accept the considerable diversity in the Central European space and instead of searching for the commonalities and shared agenda of the region focuses on the issues of common concern which the region faces as consequence of past developments or current economic, environmental or mobility challenges.

**Figure 22:** Programme area INTERREG VB (2014-2020) Central Europe



Source: Central Europe programme 2014: 5

Figure 23: Programme strategy – objective tree INTERREG VB (2014-2020) Central Europe



Source: Central Europe programme 2014: 15

## 7. Sub-regionalism and bottom-up transnational cooperation in the Central European space

Intergovernmental cooperation between nation-states is commonly referred to as 'sub-regionalism'. Across Europe there are numerous examples of sub-regional groupings. The sub-regional groups that were established in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s mostly sought to respond to the various post-Cold War challenges facing governments, such as the need to implement economic and political reforms. A second phase of post-Cold War European sub-regionalism in the late 1990s and early 2000s came in response to the eastward enlargements of the EU and NATO and were set up with the aim of reducing the impact of the new 'dividing lines' between members and non-member countries (Cotter 2009). In his review of sub-regional cooperation in Europe, Cotter (2009) identified four main roles for those sub-regional groups that were established in the 1990s and early 2000s, namely:

- a bridging role (essentially a political role, with sub-regional groups seeking to overcome historical divisions and/or mitigating the emergence of new divisions);
- a means of helping states to integrate into the EU and NATO (be it through the functioning of the sub-regional group as a lobbying platform or for members to share experiences about the accession processes);
- a means of addressing functional and specific transnational problems and policy challenges (such as environmental problems) whereby the joint responses are meant to both help addressing challenges that are cross-border in nature as well as allowing the exchange of experiences on similar problems that are faced by the regions; and
- as facilitators of internal (political, economic and military) reforms in the post-communist states (by acting as frameworks for policy transfer, with sub-regional meetings and exchanges providing the context for transfer of ideas and by acting as frameworks for the provision of financial and technical assistance).

According to Cotter (2009: 11), the various sub-regional institutions created in the 1990s had by the late 2000s become 'established features of the European diplomatic landscape, albeit not particularly prominent ones'. International administrative and policy-making/implementation structures were established in many of these sub-regional groups, and regular meetings occur between actors from different levels and including governments and public actors, non-state actors (businesses and civil society organisations). While the effects of sub-regional cooperation are difficult to assess, Cotter (2009: 18) argued that such groupings can help to 'develop habits of cooperation amongst states (and other actors), .... a sense of common identity and interests and facilitate the coordination of policies and /or the development of common policies'.

For Central Europe, three main sub-regional groups can be identified (Cotter 2009, see Table 1). After the Eastern enlargement of the EU, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) now only has members from South-Eastern Europe and will therefore not be discussed further in this report. Aside from the CEI and Visegrád group, a third cooperation initiative – the Carpathian Convention – will also be discussed in the following in relation to their scope of activities and membership.

**Table 1:** Sub-regional groups in Central Europe

Group	Established	Founding members	Members 2009
Central European Initiative (CEI)	November 1989 Initiative of Four Integration Group / Quadrilaterale: became Central European Initiative in 1992	Austria, Hungary, Italy, Yugoslavia	Albania, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Hungary, Italy, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine.
Visegrád Group	February 1991	Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary	Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary
Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)	December 1992	Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia.

Source: Cottey 2009: 6

The Central European Initiative (CEI) arose in 1992 from the earlier 'Initiative of Four Integration Group' (established 1989 by Austria, Hungary, Italy and Yugoslavia). The CEI has today 18 members (Figure 24), including Italy (where also the Secretariat is based). The CEI is an intergovernmental forum with the following strategic objectives: to support CEI Member States on their path towards European integration; to promote the alignment of CEI Member States to EU standards; to implement small and medium-sized projects; and to 'convert constructive ideas into innovative results'. Supporting non-EU members in their preparation for future accession is a central concern, and special attention is given to capacity building in the non-EU CEI Member States.<sup>8</sup>

The focus of activities of the CEI is on cooperation on areas of shared concern by agreeing on joint perspectives and (pilot) projects, exchange of know-how between the member countries, and by providing a platform for discussions with EU institutions and international organisations. In its Action Plan 2014-2016 (CEI 2013), which is aligned with the EU Multi-annual Financial Framework and the EU2020 Strategy (EC 2010d), the CEI sets out ten priority areas for cooperation, grouped under three thematic pillars:

- Towards a knowledge-based society
  - Research and innovation
  - Life-long education and training
  - Information society
- Towards a sustainable economy and development
  - Transport, Logistics and Accessibility
  - Energy efficiency and renewable energy
  - Climate, environment and rural development
  - SMEs and business development
- Towards an inclusive society
  - Intercultural cooperation
  - Media
  - Civil society

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cei.int/content/mission-objectives>

The Action Plan 2014-2016 states that the CEI envisages to ‘play a “bridging role” between different macro-regional cooperative schemes thanks to the fact that its membership includes countries targeted by the Black Sea Synergy, the Eastern Partnership, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. The experience gained will be useful for the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy and other potential macro-regional strategies’ (CEI 2013: 5).

**Figure 24:** Members of the Central European Initiative (CEI)



Source: CEI 2013

The Visegrád Group (V4), established in 1991, is an alliance of four Central European countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) which fosters cooperation in a number of fields of common interest<sup>9</sup> with the aim of furthering European integration. The argument for joint approaches is founded on the recognition that these countries are ‘part of a single civilization sharing cultural and intellectual values and common roots in diverse religious traditions, which they wish to preserve and further strengthen’<sup>10</sup>. Visegrád cooperation is based on the principle of periodical meetings of its representatives at various levels (from the high-level meetings of prime ministers and heads of states to expert consultations). Official summits of V4 prime ministers takes place on an annual basis, under a rotating presidency. The International Visegrád Fund, established in 2000, represents the civic dimension of the V4 cooperation by providing financial support for cooperation in culture, scientific exchange, research, education, exchange of students and development of cross-border cooperation,

<sup>9</sup> These include: culture, environment, internal security, defense, science, justice, transportation, tourism, energy and information technologies.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/>

and promotion of tourism. Most of the activities that are financed are undertaken by non-governmental organizations and individual citizens.

The V4 countries have since 2010 been cooperating with Bulgaria and Romania (V4+2, see Figure 25) on developing a 'Common Spatial Development Strategy', and the document was adopted in 2014 (Institute for Spatial Development Czech Republic 2014). *The Common strategy* is based on a ministerial agreement of a *Common Spatial Development Document of V4+2 Countries*, signed in 2010, which was elaborated as a background for a more coordinated update of the national spatial development documents of the participating countries. The *Common Document* focused on the following issues:

- Delineation of development poles, development axes and transport networks on the territory of V4+2 countries and the detection of bottlenecks and gaps in the transport and energy networks.
- Proposal for further work on the Common Spatial Development Strategy, and agreement on a common approach towards the removal of barriers to spatial development on the V4+2 countries.

The *Common Strategy* concentrates on achieving the coordination of approaches to common spatial development problems in the participating countries, and on ensuring the provision of necessary services of general interest. The *Common Strategy* pursues the following aims:

- contribute to the coordination and update of national spatial development documents and development of transport networks and technical infrastructure networks,
- support spatial cohesion in Europe,
- facilitate the coordination of various sectoral policies, which influence spatial development,
- provide the V4+2 countries with arguments and support during discussions at the EU level regarding issues of spatial development policy, cohesion policy and transport and energy policies (Institute for Spatial Development Czech Republic 2014).

**Figure 25:** The V4+2 countries



Source: <http://www.v4plus2.eu/en/>

**Figure 26:** External and internal natural barriers of spatial development – V4 +2 countries (including protected nature areas) in relation to intentions of the transport and technical infrastructure



Source: Institute for Spatial Development Czech Republic 2014: 109

The Common Strategy identifies spatial development barriers and possibilities for their elimination (Figure 26), and sets out common territorial development perspectives and priorities for the V4+2 countries. There is an agreement for further cooperation between the six states, including:

- raising mutual awareness about new/updated spatial development documents, particularly with regard to the impacts of development intentions on neighbouring states;
- fostering cooperation in border areas, e.g. through the elaboration of common studies of development;
- identifying themes of relevance for further cooperation and elaborate common projects to address them;
- consider possible updates of the *Common Spatial Development Strategy of the V4+2 Countries* if (and when) the participating countries consider this important.

In identifying the areas for cooperation, the Common Strategy states that

‘the territory of the participating countries is considerably extensive and there is no specific geographic characteristic or phenomenon that would unify it into a single geographic unit, which would substantiate the *Common Strategy*. ... Problems that the participating countries have in common are caused especially by the separation of Europe into the so-called Eastern and Western block, for more than 40 years. Although this political as well as economic barrier ceased to exist for more than 20 years, and even though the participating countries have been part of the EU already since 2004, or 2007, the consequences of this isolation are still significant. They manifest themselves not only in regions along the former “Iron Curtain”, but also in regions within the territory of the participating countries and in other countries of the former Eastern bloc. Hence, solving of these problems requires a specific approach and endeavour not only from countries participating on this Common Strategy, but also from the neighbouring EU member states, EU institutions as well as neighbouring countries outside the EU. In many cases, these problems produce other needs than what countries of the so-called Western Europe have’ (Institute for Spatial Development Czech Republic 2014: 6).

In addition to these intergovernmental groups, the Carpathian Convention is worth mentioning for a discussion of commonalities and sub-spaces in Central Europe. The Carpathian Mountains stretch from the Austrian-Czech border in the West to the Romanian-Serbian border in the Southeast, through the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, and with lower hills in Hungary (Figure 2). They present an exceptional natural habitat in Central Europe, but are also characterised by socio-economic and ecological problems. These include increasing depopulation, rising unemployment and declining access to key services in rural areas; growth of urban centres located in the Carpathians with environmental impacts, intensive traffic concentrated in several mountain passes, and pollution resulting from tourism activities in parts of the region.

Cooperation on environmental issues in the Carpathians began in the late 1990s, when the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), through its Danube-Carpathian Program Office (DCPO) in Vienna, launched the Carpathian Ecoregion Initiative (CERI). While the exact dimensions of the Carpathian region has been much debated, Gaberell and Debarbieux (2014) have shown how CERI’s maps contributed to the acknowledgement of the Carpathians as a coherent (eco-)region (Figure 27). Regional cooperation in the Carpathians began in the early 2000s, and has resulted in the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention - CC), a sub-regional treaty for the protection and sustainable development of this mountain range.<sup>11</sup> The Carpathian Convention was adopted by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Ukraine in May 2003 and entered into force in January 2006. The Interim Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention (ISCC) is managed by the UNEP Regional Office for Europe (UNEP-ROE), with a location in Vienna. Cooperation under the Convention covers the following topics: biodiversity, spatial development, water and river basins, agriculture and rural development, forests, tourism, industry / energy / transport / infrastructure, cultural heritage and

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.carpathianconvention.org/>

traditional knowledge, climate change, assessment and monitoring, awareness raising / education and partnership. The activities range from the development of new protocols and the establishment of strategic partnerships with key actors in the region, to the realisation of cooperation projects and initiatives in the region and beyond.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 27:** The WWF map of the Carpathian Ecoregion



Source: WWF 2001: 2

One of the CCs cooperation projects, funded under the INTERREG IIIB CADSES programme, was ‘The Carpathian Project - Protection and sustainable development of the Carpathians in a transnational framework’. It resulted in a document on ‘Visions and Strategies in the Carpathian Area’ (VASICA), published in 2009 (Borsa et al. 2009). VASICA identifies four strategic objectives for the Carpathian area as a whole: (1) Strengthen the internal cohesion of the Carpathian region, (2) Strengthen the cohesion with other parts of the European territory, (3) Enhance economic growth and job creation in the Carpathian area, (4) Improve the management of the region’s environment and natural-cultural heritage. VASICA argued that the Carpathians should be recognised as a macro-region within the European framework, complementing the much wider EU macro-regional strategy for the Danube region (Gaberell and Debarbieux 2014). The document also called for a ‘Carpathian Space’ programme for the EU territorial cooperation funding period 2014-2020.

In summary, this section discussed existing forms of regional cooperation in Central Europe, of which CEI and Visegrád are political platforms that try to address common challenges in the their members in relation to the process of European integration. While certain similarities are acknowledged in relation to the history and culture of the regions involved, there is also a recognition that the cooperation pursues mostly political goals rather than being derived from a clear spatial development rationale. However, the recent activities by the V4+2 group have turned to the development of a joint spatial development strategy, with a view to coordinating national spatial plans and to identify and address weaknesses in the transport infrastructure that would hamper the economic development of the entire region. In addition to these groupings, which also emphasise

<sup>12</sup> See: <http://www.carpathianconvention.org/activities-34.html>

their 'bridging function' between the existing and emerging EU macro-regional strategies, the Carpathian Convention is based around a clear argument of a vulnerable 'eco-region' which requires joint responses, and – while much smaller than the existing EU macro-regional strategies – has prompted calls for a recognition of the transnational spaces in the EU policy framework.

## **8. Key actors' views on transnational issues for cooperation in Central Europe**

The results from the altogether nineteen interviews with key actors from Germany, Italy, Poland, Austria and Czech Republic (see Annexe 1) provide some indicative insights into the perceived needs for and benefits of transnational cooperation in Central Europe. The interviewees were mostly representatives of national and federal government offices and sector ministries (spatial planning, environment, transport, economy) of these five countries. Views were moreover collected from local and regional authorities, the private sector, academia and NGOs.

Across the interviewed actors, the awareness for transnational issues for cooperation in Central Europe varied, and most actors' starting point for discussion was their domestic agenda (national or regional) and the connections with directly neighbouring territories. Consequently, cross-border cooperation was given greater attention by most interviewees than the transnational scale, but also networking activities (e.g. trade, both between EU countries as well as with third countries) are seen as important. Such networking activities are, however, not necessarily based on spatial or geographical commonalities but result from common interests or political or economic connections (e.g. between major cities), and therefore can stretch far beyond the Central European space and without having a clear focus on this region. Transnational cooperation was generally seen as being more detached from local and partly also regional agendas, where cooperation needs at metropolitan or regional scale within a nation-state are considered more pressing. For national and federal state or regional public actors and interviewees from the private sector, the transnational level appears to be more tangible, albeit mostly in relation to issues which are clearly transnational in nature (such as river management or environmental issues) and / or require national or federal engagement for an EU policy agenda. Notably, this is the case for the field of transport infrastructure, and development corridors more generally, especially in relation to objectives for economic development and trade routes. A key concern of many interviewed actors was the need to improve freight transport connections, but as the Ten-T map shows (Figure 14), such cooperation along development axes extends beyond the Central European space. Major ports (notably Hamburg, but also Gdansk) are an important consideration for hinterland connections and for a navigable network of waterways between the Northern and Southern seaports. However, this focus also highlights significant tensions between economic objectives and environmental concerns, e.g. in relation to the proposed deepening of the river Elbe for large container ships. Aside from waterways and road connections, especially (high-speed) rail connections are considered crucial for freight transportation, with the main emphasis on logistical centers and a better coordination of freight transport to destinations with high population density. Also for passenger transport, improving rail and airport connections are seen as important to stimulate economic development, notably in relation to tourism and business connections. Other issues which were mentioned as relevant for transnational cooperation include water management and flood risk management along large rivers (covered by EU water policy), ecological corridors (as implemented by the EU Birds and Habitats Directives), and in relation to EU and national policy agendas on (renewable) energy networks and energy security (i.a. in relation to interconnectors and gas and oil pipelines).

Several potential growth regions have been mentioned by interviewees, which are however mostly of cross-border regional extension, such as for example the border region of Katowice (PL) – Ostrava (CR) – Žilina (Slovak Republic) based on its automobile and mining industry. Issues of common concern that would benefit from cooperation mentioned include (in no particular order):

demographic change (ageing), migration flows from rural to metropolitan areas; shortages of skilled labour in many parts of Central Europe; cross-border crime and trafficking; education (both cooperation between universities and training of qualified personnel for the growth sectors in Central Europe); innovation potential of regions and transnational research clusters; climate change policy; security policy; the Roma population; as well as land management and questions over housing demand and supply.

In addressing such issues, some interviewees reported challenges arising from variable political attention to cooperation requirements over time and dependent on governmental priorities, and the administrative support this translates into. For example, it was felt that the political attention to improving East-West connections after the fall of the Iron Curtain and Eastern EU enlargement had more recently been replaced by an increased attention to North-South connections. This is reflected the focus and geographical extension of relevant EU sector policies (transport, energy), but also the foreign policy more generally and security considerations of some countries in the Central European space (e.g. along the border to Ukraine). The result is, according to some interviewees, that for example transport projects considering East-West connections currently receive limited political attention and less financial and administrative support than North-South oriented projects. This is despite a clear demand for improved rail connections between for example Germany and Poland, which is demonstrated by growing road freight (lorry) traffic between the two countries. Moreover, and partly as a consequence of general budget cuts in public administrations, the number of staff involved in transnational cooperation (e.g. on transport infrastructure) has been significantly reduced over the past years in many countries.

Especially in Eastern European countries, it was felt that insufficient political attention is given to cross-border and especially transnational cooperation. The reasons given for this were that the attention given to the internal transition processes after accession to the EU, with a main emphasis on establishing domestic institutional structures and internal cohesion, left little room to consider the wider transnational dimension of policy development and action. But also in the Western (federal) countries of Germany and Austria, it was felt that most political and administrative attention was focused on cooperation within the nation-state (i.e. between federal states), or with directly neighbouring regions. As a consequence, the capacity to fully consider and address coordination and cooperation requirements was felt to be hampered both in Western and Eastern countries, and aside from limited administrative resources for such issues also a greater political vision was missing. Moreover, cooperation is not helped by very different governance and institutional arrangements to deal with issues of transnational spatial development. Interviewees commented that finding suitable contact persons between the federal countries (e.g. Germany) and more centralised countries (e.g. Czech Republic) still demands considerable time and effort, as does negotiating cultural and linguistic differences in cooperation<sup>13</sup>. Differences in legal and administrative systems and different currencies in use in the countries of Central Europe were mentioned as further institutional and practical barriers to transboundary cooperation. A better coordination of policies and actors across different levels, sectors and political borders was seen as important by many interviewees to address the current shortcomings in spatial development responses in a wider geographical context. Building capacity to be able to deal with cross-border and transnational issues more habitually in future was seen as important, as was the need to develop new approaches and instruments to address coordination needs more effectively across national borders.

In terms of the appropriate scale for addressing the identified cooperation needs, most interviewees agreed that the Central European space was too diverse to lend itself easily for an agreement on a

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<sup>13</sup> In relation to linguistic challenges it was noted by some interviewees that English is the working language in the transnational territorial cooperation programme for Central Europe for project partners in this diverse cooperation area, and although it is the second or third language is therefore of practical value for communication and interaction within transnational project teams. However, the requirement for reporting in English was seen as placing considerable demands especially on smaller project partners. Moreover, using a 'compromise language' such as English which is not the native tongue of any of the participants was seen as a barrier for developing the identity of the transnational region.

transnational cooperation agenda. Even so, the current delineation of Central Europe by the INTERREG programme is seen as a useful platform for cooperation on different matters, involving many and very different partners and offering flexibility for cooperation on issues of relevance to some sub-spaces only or to actors with common interests or concerns and not necessarily closely centred around a transnational rationale. For most actors, existing cross-border cooperation structures and intergovernmental arrangements between neighbouring countries (e.g. Visegrád) present an important and adequate framework for cooperation on those needs that actors have identified<sup>14</sup>. Shared history and common agendas (e.g. in relation to transition processes, and preparation for EU or NATO accession) are seen as an important 'glue' for groups such as Visegrád. Overcoming border effects, especially along the former Iron Curtain, are widely accepted as an important focus for cooperation, but the focus of such cooperation is in the views of most interviewees indeed focused only on border regions and does not require a wider transnational focus. Several examples of spatial development studies in border regions (e.g. Czech-German / Saxonian, or Polish-Czech borders) were mentioned, which are expected to feed into joint development strategies for these cross-border areas. For those actors from Central Europe that are directly involved in the EU macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea Region (Northern Germany, Poland), the Danube Region (Southern Germany, Czech Republic, Austria) and the Alpine Region (Italy, Southern Germany), these approaches have become an important frame of reference for their work<sup>15</sup> and for considering how Central Europe 'fits into this new map of Europe'. However, the interviewees also acknowledged that the EU macro-regional approach requires considerable commitment and investment, and that such an approach should only be pursued where there is a very clear added-value for a transnational region.

Overall, there was little support for comprehensive and integrated approaches (such as pursued by EU macro-regional strategies for other transnational spaces) for Central Europe. In particular, the added-value of a macro-regional strategy vis-à-vis existing cooperation arrangements was questioned, and interviewees pointed out that a clear identification of the common needs and common visions, starting from bottom-up cooperation, would be necessary before discussing the most suitable approach and instruments to address the cooperation needs. Several interviewees thus argued for a clarification of the needs and agenda for cooperation in Central Europe, through studies and political debate, and a clarification of responsibilities for addressing certain issues in the different countries. However, they also considered a more issue-specific and scale-flexible cooperation to be more appropriate for Central Europe than investing much time in a comprehensive and possibly less flexible macro-regional strategy or similar approach. While the wariness towards integrated strategies reflects concern over complex coordination and administrative demands, several interviewees also expressed the more fundamental doubt that functional connections can be appropriately considered in comprehensive and integrated strategies for clearly delineated territories, seeing as every functional issue has a different geographical extension and therefore requires the involvement of different territorial actors. Some interviewees therefore suggested to start with an analysis of the key sectoral issues of transnational relevance, such as transport, and consider these from a spatial development perspective in relation to expected or desired effects on the region and other policies. On this basis, a 'network strategy' could then be developed that could form the basis for an agenda for transnational cooperation. This would facilitate the prioritization of actions and a discussion of how cooperation would be most fruitfully organized, and at which level of scale and by which actors the cooperation needs should be addressed. One important aspect of such a 'network strategy' approach would also be to involve younger generations in the process to identify current and future cooperation needs, but also to help foster a transnational identity in Central Europe.

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<sup>14</sup> Although Italian interviewees referred mostly to existing cooperation structures for the Alpine and Mediterranean regions, rather than groupings in Central Europe.

<sup>15</sup> Even if in practice the involvement of countries in the actions and projects of the strategies for the Baltic Sea Region and Danube Region varies.

## 9. Concluding reflections

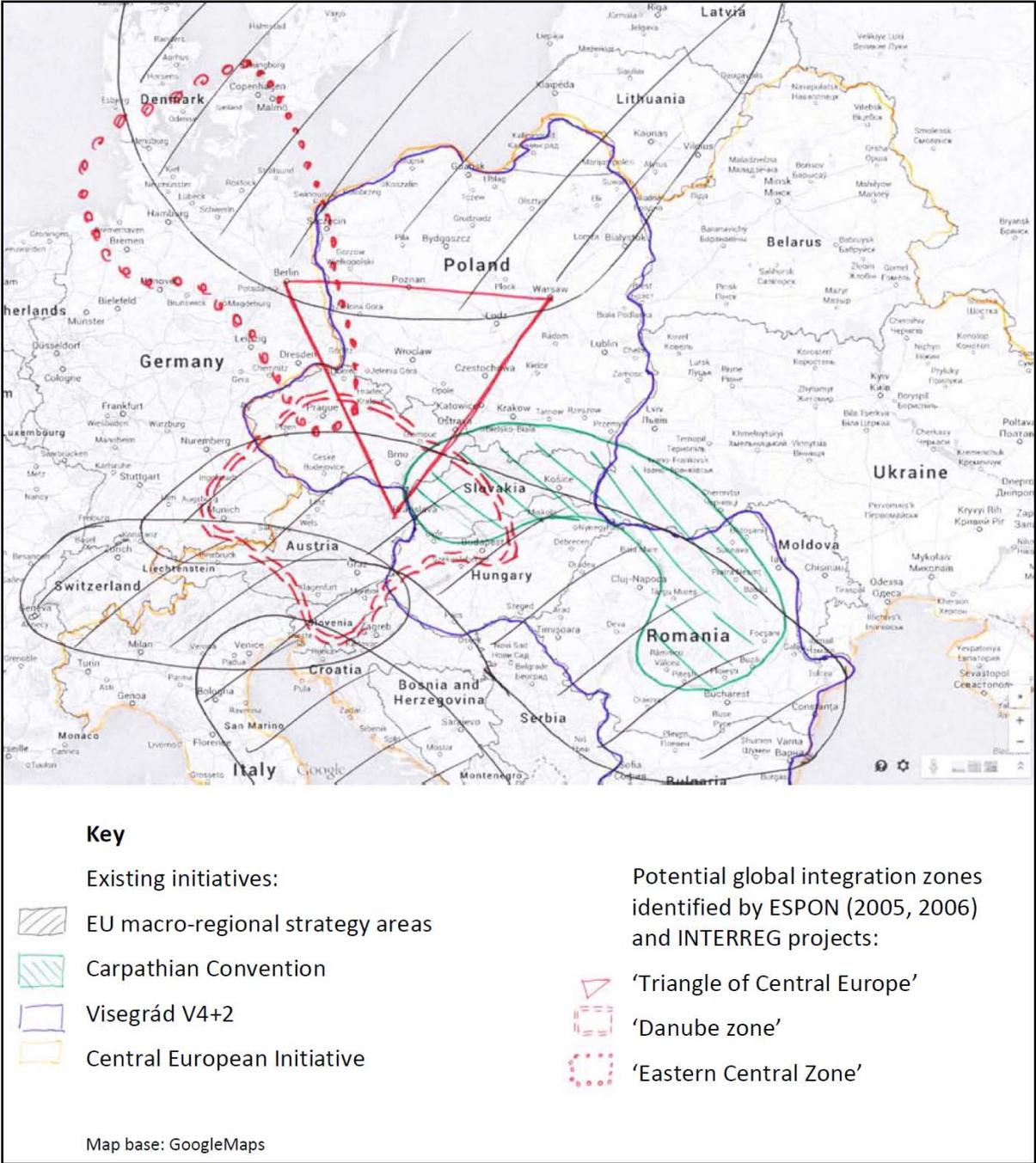
This report raised the question of which issues require transnational cooperation in Central Europe, and whether there are arguments for a macro-regional strategy for Central Europe. Based on the discussions presented in this report, it can be concluded that there are currently no clear and convincing arguments for a comprehensive and integrated strategy for the large area of the Central European space. This is because the region is very diverse, and – at the level of Central Europe as a whole – misses a clear transnational rationale or ‘core issue’ around which cooperation could be structured and which would ensure longer-term political attention (such as is present with the problem of Eutrophication for the Baltic Sea Region). As a consequence, from an issue-based analysis, the potential added-value of a macro-regional strategy for Central Europe is unclear, and the investment of developing such an approach around a fuzzy transnational agenda would likely be too great given uncertain opportunities and benefits. This assessment, however, does not offer a comment on the potential political value of such a policy approach, because as this report has also shown, EU macro-regional strategies have become an important frame of reference in discussions on policy agendas and cooperation needs, and are also prompting actors outside the defined ‘macro-regions’ to position themselves (and their region) in this new ‘map of Europe’.

Yet, while an EU macro-regional strategy for Central Europe may not be a logical step for deeper transnational cooperation at the current time, this does not mean that there is no demand for improved coordination and thus for a focused discussion on transboundary cooperation in the Central European space. This report has shown that cooperation needs arise around sector-specific issues, such as EU policy agendas for river management, transport corridors and energy networks. Considering the position of Central Europe within the greater European space shows that the region is an important ‘bridge’ or ‘hinge zone’ between the Baltic Sea and the Adriatic and Black Sea, and between Eastern and Western Europe. Moreover, a number of ‘sub-spaces’ in the Central European space can be defined, which show greater commonalities and coherence than the Central European space as a whole. Such sub-spaces for cooperation appear around particular functions or projects and involve different actors groups, policy communities, and funding regimes. As potential global economic integration zones, a ‘Triangle of Central Europe’, a ‘Danube zone’ and a ‘Central Eastern zone’ have been identified in previous studies. These are partly overlapping with each other, and also with existing forms of bottom-up cooperation in the region (Figure 28). Improving the accessibility of the eastern regions has been recognized as one of the key challenges to achieve better integration and to reap full potential, especially in the ‘Central Eastern zone’, and EU transport policy projects seek to address such bottlenecks and gaps in the transport system, although more recently the emphasis has shifted to improving North-South connections. What seems to be missing at present, however, is a clear overview of the cooperation needs that arise from this range of initiatives, and the potential (spatial) impacts the various cooperation projects and investments will have.

The question that follows from this report is therefore not whether there are cooperation needs, as these clearly exist, although they concern parts of Central Europe, sub-spaces and corridors, rather than the entire and rather diverse transnational region. Instead, the focus of political debate might be more fruitfully directed at trying to identify the political agendas for cooperation across Central Europe, how different sectoral policy initiatives can best be coordinated as transport, energy and water management initiatives (and others) are largely conceived from their sectoral perspectives and objectives and do not consider wider implications for the development of the region. While the INTERREG programme offers little guidance on clarifying the transnational strategy for Central Europe, it provides a useful platform for actors to engage in discussions on cooperation needs, priorities and agendas, which may result in some more strategic action. Existing bottom-up cooperation structures in Central Europe present an important institutional framework and substantive cooperation agendas for parts of the larger region, and can be important arenas for a wider discussion on transnational cooperation in Central Europe, its rationale and identity.

The principle of subsidiarity should be a guide post for discussing the issues which should be addressed at transboundary level. However, at which level of scale cooperation would be most beneficial and how it would be organized requires more reflection. Many issues and projects affecting Central Europe actually stretch beyond the region as defined by the INTERREG programme (as for example the connection between the port of Hamburg and its hinterland), but perhaps more important is that addressing functional issues and cooperation around interlinkages might be better addressed in a flexible and task-specific manner than through comprehensive and integrated strategies for rather rigidly defined territories. In any case, clarifying the agenda for cooperation first, starting with sectoral issues and problems and ‘unravelling’ their spatial effects would be a useful exercise, before discussing how existing and future cooperation needs in the region can best be addressed and which governance arrangements would be most promising to achieve coordination.

**Figure 28:** Overlay of existing and proposed regional groupings in the Central European space



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## **Annexe 1: Interview partners and interview guideline**

Altogether 19 key actors from Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Italy and Austria were interviewed on key issues for transnational cooperation from their work experience and perspective. The interviews were undertaken in the actors' preferred (usually native) language, in person or by phone or – where interviewees were not available for a personal conversation by email - in the period of May until July 2014. The input of the interviewees is gratefully acknowledged.

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- Ms. Noemi Giordano (Regional Contact Point for Transnational Cooperation in the Piedmont Region)
- Ms. Federica Corrado (President of CIPRA Italia (since January 2014); Researcher in Urban Planning at the Politecnico di Torino)
- Mr. Roberto Strocco (Unioncamere Piemonte - the regional association of Chambers of Commerce of Piedmont)

The interviews were conducted by Magdalena Belof (for Polish actors), Milan Turba (for Czech actors), Marco Santangelo (for Italian actors), Jakob Strohmaier (for Austrian actors) and Stefanie Dühr (for German actors) according to the following guideline questionnaire:

### **City Regions project**

#### **Guidelines questionnaire WP5: Transnational issues in 'Central Europe'**

##### **Note for interviewers:**

The following questions are intended as guideline questions, which should lead to a rather open discussion with 3 to 5 relevant stakeholders in each country from:

- strategic levels of public administration (spatial planning ministries, transport departments, energy, economic development, government think tanks etc.),
- the private sector (Chambers of Commerce etc), as well as
- relevant NGOS or interest groups (e.g. existing transnational associations, environmental NGOs)

The aim of the discussion is to identify the transnational issues for cooperation, from the perspective of such key strategic stakeholders.

If the interviews are held face-to-face, they should be supported by 'blank' topographic maps of the wider Central European space, and interviewees should be invited to draw on the map to show the issues around which transnational cooperation is needed or beneficial. If interviews are conducted by Skype or phone, the interviewer could ask about the location of issues for cooperation and record these on a map him-/ herself.

The following guideline questions are proposed to structure the discussion, but also the summary of the interview. The interviews should be documented on 2-3 pages each (supported by the map showing areas of proposed cooperation), providing a summary (and if necessary some interpretation) of the main points of discussion.

##### **Guideline questions:**

- 1) Can you explain your position and role within your organisation?
- 2) Can you give some examples of key projects or initiatives that are of interest to your organisation and which involve cooperation with partners from other countries?
- 3) On which issues do you see a need or benefit for cooperation at transnational scale? i.e. issues which have a wider reach than the nation-state or even cooperation across the national borders (in border regions)?

*(N.B. the following list may be used to prompt responses from the interviewee:*

- i. Issues arising around new or proposed large transport corridors / projects?*
- ii. Issues arising around energy infrastructure?*
- iii. Issues around other major infrastructures?*
- iv. Issues around environmental concerns affecting large territories?*
- v. Issues in relation to economic development?*

*vi. Other transnational issues?)*

- 4) Can you identify the reach and approximate location of the key issues you identified on the (a) map?
- 5) Is your organisation planning to arrange coordination or cooperation around these issues, and if so, how?
- 6) Which governance arrangements, and which types of instruments would be most suitable to achieve coordination on transnational issues in the wider Central European space (who would be involved, what would be the cooperation area, how would coordination be achieved?) Would there be a role for the EU in this cooperation / coordination, and what role could / should that be?
- 7) Is there, in your view, an argument for an integrated strategy at the transnational scale to coordinate cooperation around such transnational issues, should cooperation be better organised in a theme-specific / project-specific way around different agendas?
- 8) Are there any other points you would like to mention in relation to transnational cooperation in the greater Central European space?

Thank you for your time and cooperation!