

CENTROPE Initiative – Lessons Learned and Inspirations for the Western Balkans

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Summary

European integration is a long-lasting and multi-layered process with different dynamics in particular parts of Europe. Important parts of these processes are cross-national, territorial cooperation initiatives at the meso-regional level, where several lessons for integration can be found and used for inspiration and transfer of experience. The last decade of the twentieth century was a period of optimism and positivity in Central Europe, fostering convergence and cooperation among cities and regions. One of the most visible projects of this era was the CENTROPE (Central European Region) initiative. The objective of CENTROPE, among others, was to create a governance framework for effective and efficient cooperation in an area of more than six million citizens and thousands of high-skilled laborers with the potential to be competitive in the European economy. However, the initiative did not deliver the expected results and, for the past several years, it appears to be inactive.

On the basis of an extensive literature review, 12 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from the area of public policy and academia, and experience from more than 20 years of working in the field of cross-border cooperation, this paper discusses lessons from CENTROPE that can serve as an inspiration for territorial governance, regional identity management, place branding, and image building in the Western Balkan region. Like the Western Balkans, the economic and social development of CENTROPE was and still remains uneven; there are different administrative systems, complicated histories among the countries, and resulting societal atmospheres that do not favour close cooperation. As our research concludes, CENTROPE did not manage to fully overcome these problems because of failing to establish polycentric governance arrangements, which would have enabled an effective management of spatial activities in the region. This paper examines this development and concludes with recommendations that can feed into debates on territorial governance and regional identity management in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: CENTROPE, Western Balkans, Territorial Cooperation, Macro-regions, Regional Identity

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Introduction

Central European space, with its territorial and societal fragmentation and increasing spatial inequalities and polarization, has been a great challenge for spatial planning since the 1990s. It was during this period that the region began to harmonize after nearly half a decade of different social, cultural, and political developments and look for ways to foster cooperation (Schulz, 2019; Iammarino et al, 2017). These inequalities are increasing at all geographic and administrative levels (Böhme and Martin, 2019). CENTROPE, as a space between Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, is an example of how politicians have attempted to deal with these issues, seeking a more harmonious and sustainable development of the entire region. Although the geography and political situation is different than the Western Balkans region, the issues such as the history, mental imagery, lack of common vision, and different political and administrative systems are similar. We present how these complex issues were tackled in the case of CENTROPE, although with limited success, and how this can be stimulating for similar discussions in the Western Balkans.

The paper discusses the development of the CENTROPE region 17 years since its establishment with the signing of the Kittsee Declaration, where 16 actors agreed to work jointly towards the creation of the Central European Region. This development can serve as an example for cross-border cooperation and provide insights and examples for inspiring the development of cooperation and attendant governance models for the Western Balkans. The research is based on a set of 12 interviews performed in 2018 and 2019 with key stakeholders from the CENTROPE region, some of which are quoted in the text. In the first part, we review the literature of competition and cooperation between cities and regions as a theoretical base for the paper. These types of competition and cooperation processes have been running across Europe for the last two decades and have provided the underlying context for

many territorial processes – e.g. fostering and improving territorial governance processes, management of regional identity, and promoting social and regional cohesion. The second part of the paper is dedicated to the case study of the CENTROPE region. The third part discusses the CENTROPE initiative and its impact on the territory, and the final part discusses lessons and inspirations from CENTROPE, which can serve to instigate governance arrangements and regional identity building in the Western Balkans.

Competition and cooperation in cities and regions

Transformation and the re-structuring of cities and regions have been key topics in spatial planning, economics, as well as urban sociology discourse for more than 20 years (see Finka and Petříková 2000; Kováč and Komrská 2000; Jaššo 2015; and Jaššo, Hajduk 2019). Processes of European integration have delivered a plethora of concepts and paradigms aimed at steering the optimal spatial development of the old continent (e.g. Blue Banana Europe (Brunet, 1989) or the 'European Grape' (Kunzmann and Wegener, 1991)). Accelerated globalisation (and particularly its negative impacts) have also generated processes of regionalisation and emphasized mutual interconnection. Some approaches consider both as part of a single process and introduce the term 'glocalization' (see e.g. Messely et al., 2010; Jaššo, Hajduk 2019). Competition between cities, regions, and other territorial constructs has been discussed in rather intensive and multidimensional way. Several types and sizes of territorial subjects (cities, FUAs, macroregions) generate their own specific and peculiar aspects of competitiveness, defined by Mayerhofer (2005) as the ability to generate while being and remaining exposed to international competition and possessing relatively high level of income and high employment levels. The various typologies of territorial constructs include several fundamental characteristic and traits. In 2003, the OECD introduced the following key factors (see Tosics, 2005):

- specialisation and sectoral structure (clustering and advantageous location factors);
- innovation and knowledge (education and spread of know-how); and
- accessibility and connectivity (physical infrastructure and communication links).

Rapid technological changes, geopolitical shifts, demographic changes, as well as newly established innovations in production, distribution, and consumption patterns have significant effects on the new role and positioning of European regions within these processes of mutual competition (more e.g. Giffinger, 2005; Jaššo, Hajduk 2019). Regions have taken on new roles as interregional and highly volatile competition exposed long-neglected weaknesses and enabled territories to utilise their strengths and hidden potentials. Each region is increasingly challenged to leverage its advantages and assets to try and find mechanisms to compensate for its weaker points (see Jaššo and Hajduk, 2019). Currently, some of the most discussed policy topics are ideas such as smart cities and smart regions, which emphasize the ability of territorial subjects to learn (e.g. Husar et al, 2017).

Understanding regions as single and autonomous places within or across national states has begun an intense discourse on regionalization (see e.g. Jaššo, 2009a). The term "region" has become one of the most significant metaphors of current cultural, political, economic changes and practices (Tangkjaer and Linde-Laursen, 2004, p.11). The most significant factors of success in regional competition are considered to be economic diversity, human capital, social cohesion, institutional network, physical environment, communication networks, and institutional capacity (Parkinson, 1997, in Fertner 2006, p.13). Giffinger (2005) points out the following observations regarding the highly dynamic and volatile environment in which regional competition unfolds (further elaborated in Jaššo 2015 or Jaššo and Hajduk 2019):

- Traditional, rather linear spatial development is being replaced by processes of polarization, fragmentation, and sometimes segregation (e.g. gentrification);
- Spatial development of urban settlements with high density in central spatial structures is being replaced by networking spatial structures. New developmental poles beyond traditional hierarchic structures are rising. The space of flows is replaced by the space of networks (see Taylor, 2001);
- Competition of municipalities, cities and regions is increasing on an international level, while the traditional hierarchic ties within national contexts are fading away. Moreover, this competition is not a linear one – the number of competitors, their strengths, relevance, positioning, and assets are continuously changing. The city or region is not competing in only one competition but enters into different competitive races and builds various strategic and tactical alliances and cooperation patterns; and
- Cooperation and competition are becoming complementary mechanisms. The same cities or regions might be partners as well as competitors in various fields. Highly profiled identity, authentic values, as well the legibility of the partner are key in the long term (more see Jaššo, 2015).

It goes without saying that a unique, authentic, original, and attractive regional profile is the result of continuous, long, and often arduous process based on the interaction of many stakeholders. Obtaining competitive advantages in a particular region is not possible without a legible, stable, and clearly profiled vision and regional identity. This has been intensely reflected in the development strategies, planning, as well as the regional policies on various levels. The unique profile of each region, its positioning in the European and

global market, values, and distinctive traits are some of its most precious assets, since these issues cannot be emulated, bought, or stolen (see Jaššo 2009a; 2015).

Competitiveness has become one of the major leading forces of regionalization, being the leitmotif of its legitimization. If a given territorial subject neglects the process of competition (or cooperation, which is considered as one of the most effective tools of interregional competition (see Giffinger 2005)) it can lead to the marginalization and decline of the whole region ("others will outmanoeuvre us" – Tangkjaer and Linde-Laursen, 2004, p.11). One of the fundamental preconditions of success is the authenticity of the message. This means not only finding the unique selling proposition (USP) of the region but, more than ever before, developing and managing regional identity in concordance with past developments, value priorities, and the expectations of inhabitants (more see Jaššo 2009b; 2015; Jaššo and Hajduk 2019).

The regional identity and USP of any territorial subject can be instrumentalised by several marketing and external communication tools, e.g. through place branding or creation of a corporate identity for the region or city. The term place branding refers to the cluster of activities aimed at highlighting the essential characteristics and mental traits of the given region or city. Brand is a unique mental concept of thoughts, emotions, and characteristics delivered to selected target groups. This term has been widely used since 2000, though the region or city as a subject of marketing campaigns was already being researched in the early 1990s. After shy and methodologically insufficient initial attempts, it has been clearly shown that any territorial subject can be a specific category of product, requiring specific and precise methods of brand management (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005, p. 506). Nowadays, place branding is one of the most dynamically developing phenomena of regional marketing (more see Jaššo 2009a; Jaššo 2015). The brand

of a region, city, or any other territorial subject carries an emotional added value, promotes identification with place, secures orientations, and evokes feeling of empathy (Tangkjaer and Linde-Laursen 2004). The general idea of the majority of place branding concepts is to create a profile of the region (or any other territorial subject) as an attractive, unique, and competitive brand. The specific situation of territorial subjects allows them to clearly emphasize some of their core features (e.g. uniqueness, openness, friendliness, hospitality) related to a certain place or area. The authenticity of the message is a necessary precondition in order to raise the emotional value of the brand and thus to develop brand loyalty.

CENTROPE Region Case Study

Background Information on Developing the CENTROPE Initiative

CENTROPE is an acronym for the Central European Region consisting of territories within the quadrangle formed by the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Austria. The CENTROPE name and brand was a result of a competition among schoolchildren back in 2002, organised within the project CERNET, a cross-border, educational cooperation project. More than 100 schools took a part in the competition with the winning proposal coming from the students of the KMS Josef Enslein-Platz secondary school in Vienna. The name CENTROPE combines both of the basic, semantic characteristics of the region – central and Europe –together. The first cross-border, Interreg III A project was launched under this name in 2003.

The idea of creating CENTROPE materialized in 2003 in Kittsee. However, the history of cooperation in this space is much older. In the 1990s, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, several small activities aimed at re-initiating communication and cooperation between the CENTROPE countries were starting to occur. It was the EU integration, however, that gave the greatest impetus for continuing cooperation efforts (Austria became an EU member in 1995, while Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary entered together

in 2004). Additionally, it provided a sort of guarantee of staying in one large European space and being able to access funding for their cooperation activities. Joining the EU and the 'EU narrative' fostered new members to overcome the complexity of relations in the region, including issues such as troublesome historic relations, as well as political and administrative differences.

The participating territorial subjects – namely the counties of Vienna, Lower Austria, Burgenland, Southern Moravia, Southern Bohemia, Bratislava, Trnava, Győr-Moson-Sopron, Vas and the cities of Brno, České Budějovice, Bratislava, Trnava, Győr, Eisenstadt, Sopron, Szombathely and St. Pölten – decided to prolong and advance their bilateral, cross-border cooperation activities by forming the newly established Central European Region (CENTROPE) (Figure 1). The Southern Bohemia region and city of České Budějovice later withdrew from the initiative.

Figure 2. The CENTROPE Region



Source: TourCentrope, 2020.

The political declaration adopted in September 2003 stressed common goals for raising the prosperity and fostering the sustainable development

of the newly established region. Several sectoral development perspectives have been defined, including communication and public relations, labour market and qualification, tourism, science, research and innovation, culture and society, as well as multilateral co-operation management (more in e.g. Jaško 2009b; Krajatis et al, 2003; Lettner 2007). The Kittsee declaration (2003) stressed the following statements:

- establish CENTROPE as a common region of growth and prosperity and support all measures towards the attainment of this goal;
- create an attractive, internationally-respected, quality location covering all areas of life and improve the framework conditions for cross-border cooperation; and
- intensify cooperation by networking existing initiatives, communicate the future potential of the region to the public at large, and strengthen the social and entrepreneurial commitment to the Central European Region.

After the initial the Kittsee declaration in 2003 ('Building a European Region'), a series of political memoranda followed (see Jaško, 2009b or CENTROPE, 2006). These memoranda and common meetings of stakeholders predestined future vectors of CENTROPE's development and were clearly dominated by the optimistic, future-oriented, and progressive attitudes of the main actors. A series of political memoranda significantly contributed to building capacity, outlining structures, and defining the context of the CENTROPE region's activities. The St. Pölten 2005 Political memorandum 'We grow together, together we grow' constituted the first joint statement of the CENTROPE partners regarding sector-driven thematic areas and challenges in the common region. Dominant voices underlined a common future and the need for a common unique selling proposition in international markets. The conference 'We Shape the Future – CENTROPE 2006 plus,' held in March 2006

at the Vienna City Hall, marked the end of the first phase of the CENTROPE project and the kick-off of a new stage of cooperation in the region. On the occasion of this event, governors, region and county presidents, and mayors presented the 'Vision CENTROPE 2015' for the first time to a general audience. As an outcome of cooperation ventures implemented during the preceding two-and-a-half years, the 'Vision' comprised the totality of shared ideas for development and togetherness in the quadrangle. The political conference Bratislava 2007 – 'Ready for Take-off' was held in November 2007, roughly eighteen months after the adoption of 'Vision CENTROPE 2015'. A timetable for concrete cooperation activities, supported by partners on an equal footing, occupied the forefront of political interest during the conference.

The period between 2003 to 2006 was predominantly dedicated to building sectoral networks and political structures (e.g. Fertner, 2006, p. 76-77). May 1, 2004 – the day of accession of Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary to the European Union – provided an additional boost and new dynamics to these efforts. This act removed almost all restrictions and increased the degree of economic convergence.

The backbone of this region is represented by the metropolitan region of Vienna-Bratislava, with its long common history, mutual functional ties, and high dynamics of growth.

One of the most significant competitive advantages of the CENTROPE region is its scientific profile. More than 25 universities and academic bodies are based in the region and their cooperation with business institutions is promoted intensely. CENTROPE is striving to maintain its identity as a sustainable region by stressing its natural landscape potential. The Danube River and the green belt between Vienna and Bratislava are irreplaceable landmarks of the region. The outstanding quality of life in the region derives from the proximity of urban centres and attractive natural landscapes. Significant efforts have been

made in terms of revitalizing brownfield areas in the region, especially in urban areas (e.g. gasometers in Vienna or the Eurovea area on the Danube embarkment in Bratislava). Having entered into the accelerating competition of European regions, CENTROPE has to clarify and live its vision in order to mobilize and utilise all its extraordinary resources and potentials (see Krajatis et. al., 2003). However, many questions are still unanswered and many issues remain to be solved.

CENTROPE Vision 2015 and its Revaluation in 2020

The strategic vision of any territorial subject might be one of the most powerful driving forces regarding its future development. If the vision resists being a set of phrases and clichés, but presents a vibrant array of imageries, it can be a very profound and powerful tool of regional development. The vision must encapsulate all underlying ideas, aims, values, and basic assumptions, and must reflect the authentic and trustworthy identity of the region. Finding a common vision for regions and territories that have been repeatedly contested during previous historical eras (valid both for Central Europe and Western Balkan) or that are located on historical tectonic rifts is especially difficult and important. The vision is also a central control mechanism when the current status quo of the region is assessed, revaluated, or comes into the spotlight during disputes. The vision should be a living organism, being able to absorb new impulses, correct obvious drawbacks and errors, and be mobilised in times of decreased overall societal stamina and mental energy.

With this in mind, the CENTROPE Vision 2015 has been adopted within the Vienna 2006 Memorandum (CENTROPE, 2006) as a result of more than two years of work by more than 200 experts from the fields of politics, public administration, economy, research, culture, tourism, labour, and the media in all four participating countries. Vision 2015 was prepared as an interim open document with the main goal of setting up the vectors of future development,

defining relevant tasks and ambitions, and reviving its image beyond purely political declarations. In this way, CENTROPE tried to move closer to inhabitants, regional actors, and local stakeholders. The document is directed more towards its main actors and players, however, and does not highlight dimensions of EU integration as robustly as it has in previous political declarations. Processes of collaboration should overcome national differences, distinctions, and barriers. Though there have never been open animosities amongst the stakeholders from different national parts of CENTROPE, the vision tries to encapsulate and reflect all national perspectives and points of view. CENTROPE Vision 2015 should generate further suggestions, alternatives, impulses, and reflections on the historical and contemporary development of the region (Jaško 2009b). In 2015, the horizon of the vision was set up broadly enough to overcome current and temporary setbacks, unsolved matters, and everyday obstacles. At the same time, the 2015 time-horizon was set up to be not that far in the future, making the effort more tangible and motivating. As such, 'Vision CENTROPE 2015' functions as a snapshot to inform findings and possible perspectives proposed thus far. It seeks to provide suggestions, trigger reflections, generate new impulses, and offer

a framework for the creative and productive evolution of CENTROPE, in keeping with the motto "We grow together - together we grow" (CENTROPE, 2015, p.15). If we outline the results of Vision 2015 now, in 2020, we can observe the following conclusions:

- All requirements for the free movement of citizens have been fulfilled. The economic growth of the CENTROPE is on-going (Figure 2), though the region also faces the challenges of the current pandemic.
- An intensification of cooperation between 'old' and 'new' EU member countries continues. After severe measures related to the COVID-19 crisis, the borders among participating countries were opened as soon as possible. (The borders in most EU countries, including CENTROPE members, were closed in the middle of March 2020 and were opened starting on May 21, 2020).
- Research and development networking is operational and searching for new challenges. The cooperative business clusters (e.g. automotive cluster, services Austria-Slovakia) seem to be running smoothly.

Figure 2. GDP at Market Prices in CENTROPE countries, in EUR (2010-2019)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Austria	295,896	310,12	318,653	323,910	333,146	344,269	357,299	370,295	385,711	398,682
Czech Republic	157,920	165,202	162,587	159,461	157,821	169,558	177,438	194,132	210,892	223,945
Hungary	98,98	101,552	99,733	102,032	105,905	112,210	115,259	125,600	133,780	143,826
Slovakia	68,093	71,214	73,483	74,354	76,255	79,758	81,038	84,521	89,605	94,171

Source: EUROSTAT, 2020.

Yet, on the other hand:

- The feeling of a common regional identity, social cohesion within the region, and feelings of togetherness are still rather weak and vague. Despite the intensive media coverage of all

main CENTROPE events since 2000, the public has remained rather detached and feedback has been scarce.¹

- Decision-making processes are still not fully or formally harmonised (e.g. Clark, 2007, p. 17).² Furthermore,

differences in terms of governance structures (especially between Austria and Slovakia) were heavily exposed and cooperation went on based more on personal contacts than on smooth governance and decision-making mechanisms (Telle, 2017). However, this can be overcome. As one interviewee commented: *“There are some challenges, but if you really want to cooperate, you can do it. You can jump over it. Also, in Austria inside there are these things, but if there is willingness, you can do it”* (Public Officer 2, Austria, 2018).

- Business forces prefer to be related to the TWIN-City Brand rather than to CENTROPE. CENTROPE is still perceived as more scientific or as a political concept and necessary business-driven attention is lacking. Initial development dynamics in some areas has decreased and new impulses are still lacking (Jaššo, 2009b).

In 2012, as a result of project Centrope Capacity, the document ‘Centrope Strategy 2013+’ was released nine years after the kick-off in Kittsee (Centrope Agency, 2012). This document reflects the more recent developments in society, strongly impacted by the global economic crisis of 2008/2009, and provides a more realistic view on the region as well as arguably more realistic objectives. It seems as if the first decade, characterised by optimism and enthusiasm for the beginning of a new millennium, was an introduction to cooperation with the objective of illustrating to partners what could be done together. Suddenly, it was time for more pragmatic approaches focused on implementing concrete initiatives and reflecting on existing challenges, including potential brain-drain or excessive dependence on the automotive industry, among other issues. Four focus areas had been determined (knowledge region, human capital, spatial integration, and culture and tourism), yet governance or other forms of cooperation remain absent and the initiative remains somewhat voluntary.

CENTROPE Identity and Branding

Over the past 17 years, the CENTROPE brand personality has proven to be well-mannered and friendly, manifold and versatile, academic and sophisticated, but also diffuse and vague, artificial, and sometimes too ambitious. As stated by one interviewee: *“...the biggest success was to create this image at all, which is still very much alive”* (Academic, Austria, 2018). Marketing communication was aimed almost exclusively towards the external environment (investors, foreign journalists, and banks) and completely neglected the domestic public and partners. Neither inhabitants nor domestic small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have been the target group of the numerous communication initiatives in recent years. The only entrepreneurial subject to mention CENTROPE as the market they were operating in was the Austrian bank Raiffeisen.

From this evaluation of the overall regional marketing strategy, we can conclude that CENTROPE’s brand personality or USP is well-defined and communicated though the brand is still rather ‘young and inexperienced.’ CENTROPE is not perceived as a relevant brand to all segments of society and, even after 17 years, is rather unprofiled, lacking spontaneity, and lacklustre. Evaluating its brand knowledge (the degree of awareness and knowledge made by personal experience or the degree of intimacy of the brand), it is evident that CENTROPE is not lived and transmitted by personal experience (see Jaššo, 2009b).

An important (but often underestimated) part of any regional identity is its inner dimension – its identification with the lived space and its spatial/social structures and patterns; its ‘Wir-Gefühl.’ Space is not a mere background for our social identity creation process, but is one of its dominant categories, heavily influencing all the other dimensions of identification processes. Space cannot be ‘value-neutral;’ it is always a projection of some vision, ideology, and values (Low and Walter, 1982). Local inhabitants are always in delicate and rather awkward positions

regarding the fostering of regional identity as they are both co-creators of this identity, as well as the key recipients concerning its acceptance and evaluation. A key element in this field is the authenticity and trustworthiness of the message – a regional identity and all its facets must be based upon the inner potential and natural substance of the region. It is especially important when a new identity, branding, or vision is being built or re-born.

Highlights of CENTROPE

CENTROPE is perceived rather critically today as the expectations anchored in its strategic documents of endless prosperity were, in hindsight, not realistic. Still, it is important to review the highlights and successes achieved in the region. The biggest successes are the qualitative attributes of improved cooperation by getting to know counterparts across the border and introducing the idea that people are not living in separate countries but belong to one common space.

“This initiative should lead to integration within this space, to strengthening its competitiveness, closer cooperation between centres of the triangle Vienna, Bratislava, Brno and their regional surroundings...” (Academic, Slovakia, 2018).

“The expectations were pretty high. Due to the abolishing of physical barriers, it was supposed that national borders would diminish their role and the ties between the regional centres would be intensive. But I don't think that these expectations were fulfilled” (Public Officer 2, Slovakia, 2018).

Although it may sound like a minor success today, the greatest success of the CENTROPE initiative was launching a process of familiarisation and cooperation via communication and mutual understanding. This was linked to weak institutions in the former socialist countries, which came to interact with a more advanced and established administrative system in Austria. Increased communication was particularly crucial considering that during

the second half of 20th century all previous communication channels and contacts between Austria and the eastern bloc countries had been suspended. Although there were some smaller initiatives before 2003, their reach was limited. It was the Kittsee declaration (a success in its own right) that launched continuous communication on a formal (political conferences) and informal (workshops and non-official meetings) level, the fruits of which can still be seen today.

“...We created the standards of communication and negotiation, we got to know the people, which definitely led to better understanding in this region. In the past there was no real cooperation...” (Public Officer 1, Slovakia, 2018).

“...A lot of cooperation projects in the field of school cooperation were started then, I think that at least the programming of the Interreg period 2007 until 2014 was very much influenced by the ideas of CENTROPE” (Private Planning Consultant, Austria, 2018).

Another success, as perceived by CENTROPE stakeholders, was the creation of the CENTROPE brand. Although CENTROPE as a brand is viewed rather critically today (low diffusion towards the citizens, not recognized by businesses, etc.), it was the first time that this territory was portrayed as a single unit under a common brand, which was accepted by partners from all countries. The main idea was not to produce a slogan for marketing stickers but rather to reveal a common identity. That identity was no longer perceived based on nation states within clearly demarked national borders, but as a modern European region sharing a common heritage, territory, and culture.

Lastly, it was the first time that cooperation activities began to be considered across the whole region. The cooperation projects of the 1990s were exclusively focused on smaller parts of the border and, as a rule, only between two countries. CENTROPE covers the territory of four countries and focuses on the perception of this space as one unified territory in order to approach the development of this region

as a whole. This enables stakeholders to overcome historical tensions at the borders and provides a vision for developing the wider territory as one space with the potential to be competitive on a European and global level.

“...One of the biggest successes was starting to deal with this whole territory. From the historical point of view this was not so easy, you know Benes decrees, Hungary-Austria border history is not that easy...” (Public Officer 3, Austria, 2018).

“In regions like ours, where you have so many borders on such a limited space, you need to cooperate not only with one neighbouring country, but with this whole bunch of neighbouring countries, and it would be really essential to take this transnational point of view” (Private Planning Consultant, Austria, 2018).

Failures and Setbacks of CENTROPE

While speaking of the successes of CENTROPE, it is also important to underline its setbacks and main limitations. Firstly, there had been several rather formal issues connected to the daily operation of the initiative, including language differences (four languages from three diverse language groups). Similarly, bureaucratic procedures differ according to national legal systems, leading to lack of understanding of the processes and a loss of cooperative dynamics. Secondly, political will and cooperation is weak in the political agenda of local and regional politicians. The 2003 declaration in Kittsee is regarded as a great success due to the fact that all the members were able to find consensus and sign the memorandum of cooperation, but ever since then, political priorities have been changing. One of the key drivers of this change was the economic crisis of 2008/2009 and later, the changing political climate in the EU linked to the migration crisis of 2015. These shifts in the thinking of national and regional politicians were clearly identifiable within CENTROPE. Another issue linked to politics was the fact that the CENTROPE representatives failed to make the initiative attractive to a wider

audience in regional and local politics.

“One of the biggest limitations was the fact that you would need a lot of political power and courage to get forward ... there was not this strong force behind the project ... somehow the partner [on the other side of the border] was lost somewhere on the way [...]. This was the biggest limitation: that on the political level, it was not really important in the agenda” (Public Officer 3, Austria, 2018).

“lack of ‘personal continuity’ – new mayors, politicians” (Politician 1, Austria, 2018).

Thirdly, while the role of the borders had been changing and their importance had diminished in terms of the barrier effect, the differences among the CENTROPE countries remained. This was evident in terms of cultural and historical differences, as well as differences in the political and administrative systems (so-called multilevel mismatch). This was clear not only between the old and new EU member countries (Austria versus the rest), but also between Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Closely linked to this issue were feelings of inferiority by representatives of Slovak regions when negotiating with their Austrian counterparts.

“Paradoxically, it is the borders of the nation states as well as distribution of competences. In Slovakia we have a local, regional, and national level and it works similarly in neighbouring countries, and there are too many actors with different competences” (Public Officer 2, Slovakia, 2018).

“I think there is still this cultural difference, cultural-historical, some kind of, I don’t want to say superiority or even snobbery...it took us more time and energy to convince partners about our truth [arguments], about our view. Sometimes we even had to bring it to the boil to push our ideas...” (Public Officer 1, Slovakia, 2018).

Lastly, the PR activities and branding did not turn out to be powerful enough to overcome and sustain the rather narrow perception of sovereignty and nationalism (vs. a common

European or CENTROPE identity). In the beginning, the branding was regarded as one of the key priorities and focal points. Yet, despite the investments in branding, it did not succeed in creating a common brand of CENTROPE that could be taken up by actors from the public and private realm, nor did it create a sort of common identity among citizens.

"Maybe it is a lack of PR to its local citizens" (Public Officer 1, Austria, 2018)

"We did not manage to successfully 'sell' the outputs and benefits, like the bridge between Schlosshof and Devínska Nova ves – this is the CENTROPE in everyday life" (Politician 1, Austria, 2018).

Discussion

The CENTROPE idea was a unique initiative reflecting the overall social and economic context in Central Europe at the beginning of the 2000s, fed by optimism based on geopolitical changes and shifts and fostered by the opening of borders in the 1990s. Regions placed directly on the interface between the former East and West should have provided for a masterful initiative of European political and territorial integration and act as a role model for other cases born under similar circumstances. With the advantage of historic hindsight, it is possible to be critical about its successes and setbacks. For an objective evaluation, several target groups and levels are discussed. The following are those that we consider to be most essential, covering both the institutional level (political level, administrative level, and common projects) as well as 'soft' informal issues (public perception):

a. Political level

On the political level, CENTROPE served as an umbrella initiative as well as an ice-breaker for initiating cooperation among old and new EU member countries. Before CENTROPE, the citizens as well as the political representations of the participating countries were slowly and cautiously

introducing themselves to one another. Their relationships were less balanced given the formal and real superiority of the old EU countries (Austria) economically, politically, and socially. CENTROPE, as an EU-funded project, sought to overcome these imbalances and provided some political and economic stability. One high-level politician from Austria was very sure about CENTROPE's successes in that it prepared countries for EU entry and created the basis for a transnational region with vivid cooperation and exchange of people, goods, and ideas. From this point of view, it was definitely a success as the CENTROPE space 20 years ago was critically different than it is today. However, the circumstances changed drastically. Several crises arrived (particularly the financial crisis in 2009 and migration crisis in 2015) and not only did CENTROPE changed, but the overall mood in the EU and worldwide changed with states 'closing themselves off' (i.e. physical borders and the rise of nationalism). As public officers in Austria stated:

"For 50 years on, there was a strong wish of working together without borders[...] there was not a problem of immigration and other problems that arose, there were open borders, transferring over the borders, working together. This was more-or-less fine, but now you have a more national or regional view of this." (Public Officer 2, Austria, 2018).

"In many of the political parties they do not fight against this [rising nationalism in CEE], rather they use this atmosphere for their politics and it could have been even an advantage this kind of anti-European atmosphere for the CENTROPE initiative, because one aim was that the regional politicians write together resolutions with the EU for the common goals but has also happened not so strong." (Public Officer 1, Austria, 2018).

Especially after the migration crisis in 2015, the national borders began to play a significant role in some politicians' and citizens' mental landscapes again, though bilateral relations among the participating countries remain essentially cordial and friendly.

Broadly speaking, many of the political goals of CENTROPE were fulfilled, such as the diminishing the role of national borders, integration of policies, increased mobility, etc. We can ask if these changes would have taken place if CENTROPE did not exist, and our answer is perhaps yes, but at a slower pace and with less obvious acceptance among citizens. From a narrower perspective, some of the initial objectives were not met, including a common labour market; one single, unified, universally accepted vision for the whole CENTROPE space; and one common regional plan or functionally integrated space. A feeling of a common regional/territorial identity also remains rather vague. We need to add that as of today, none of these changes seem to be taking place in the near future considering the atmosphere worldwide, current status of CENTROPE, and the political situation on the national and regional levels in CENTROPE countries. But perhaps the current situation provides a great opportunity to leverage CENTROPE and resume cooperation again with a fresh perspective and a more realistic approach. Cooperation has evaporated over the years. At the beginning, cooperation provided the idea of a fresh start, integration, and the re-invention of a region as a vision of the bright future of a unified Europe. Arguably, the most difficult part of re-starting CENTROPE will be just this – formulating the common ground for a new vision.

b. Administrative level

One of the most visible challenges in cross-border cooperation is the so-called multilevel mismatch (Telle, 2017), wherein administrative systems in the cooperating states are not matched and responsibilities are not mirrored. In the case of CENTROPE, centralized and decentralized systems met, causing misunderstandings and time delays when trying to work together (Figure 3). A similar issue was raised in the relationship between the political and administrative level: when the political representation changed after the election, the public officials changed as well, and partners on the other side of the border had to introduce

themselves again and work on building trust. This was especially true for Slovak and Czech partners and Austrian partners expressed frustration with the matter. (The Austrian system is more independent and the terms of public officials are longer). Part of CENTROPE's aims was also the convergence of different systems and raising awareness of integration issues. This was done through exchanges of public officers and numerous seminars and common meetings fostering the need to work together and build trust. Cooperation and trust are the basis of many cross-border initiatives, as partners need to be flexible and driven to achieve the common objectives.

Another issue which came out of the field research was the professionalization of communication and creation of standards for cooperation. Austrian partners in particular were leading by example as other partners were slowly acquiring these skills and standards, something that could help them in other projects. As time went, these meetings and seminars became less frequent. Currently the project partners are meeting only annually in a formal manner. Austrian partners were often perceived as the (sometimes dominant) "pace-maker" and main decision maker, which was sometimes met with criticism by other partners. This dominance has somehow slowly faded with both positives and negatives outcomes.

c. Citizens' perception

In everyday life, the perception of CENTROPE as a profiled brand is extremely rare. The only private enterprise that referred to CENTROPE was the Raiffeisen Bank while other businesses did not mention the area as a brand at all. If you asked about CENTROPE on a street in Vienna or Bratislava, very few people would know about it; outside of these cities nearly no one would have heard of it. In the past, the business landscape in the region seemed to be more attached to the Twin Cities Vienna-Bratislava concept, which proved to be more business driven, flexible, and politically independent. Compared to the Twin City initiative, the CENTROPE idea seems to be a more political

Figure 3. Different Administrative levels compared between Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Germany

Federal Republic of Austria	Slovak Republic	Czech Republic	Federal Republic of Germany
9 provinces/states (Bundersländer)	8 regions (kraj)	14 regions (kraj)	Free State of Saxony
99 Districts	79 Districts (okres)	205 municipalities with transferred powers	10 rural districts (Landkreis) + 3 urban districts (Kreisfreie Stadt)
2357 municipalities (Gemeinden)	2928 municipalities	6253 municipalities	432 municipalities

Source: Spacek and Husar, 2018.

and scientific project with little relevance for citizens and businesses (especially SMEs). In fact, CENTROPE was more successful in its branding outside of its territory. More politicians and academics in Europe and around the world know about the project than CENTROPE's citizens themselves.

The major success of territorial integration in the CENTROPE region is related to the accession of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary into the Schengen area. In the border areas, the mobility of people for work/shopping/leisure is high (Verwiebe et al, 2017). Families spanning across two or more countries are not rare and they no longer perceive borders as a problem. On the other hand, CENTROPE, which arguably catalysed this convergence processes, did not succeed in creating a highly-profiled, common territorial identity. In the past five years, national identity has become stronger at the expense of a CENTROPE or European identity as a result of larger megatrends in Europe. At its height however, CENTROPE probably had the capacity and power to articulate this identity more distinctively but failed to do so.

d. Common projects

Before 2003, there had been several smaller projects financed by the EU (Interreg, Phare programs) or national governments dealing with particular issues in the cross-border spaces. CENTROPE as a project idea was much larger and delivered a break-through in its scale, complexity, and number of actors and stakeholders. For many years it served as an umbrella initiative supporting new project ideas. For funding agencies, it was an advantage to be under this larger initiative. However, when the funding for large projects on a CENTROPE level ran out, these projects did not manage to create a sustainable framework or structures to continue. In interviews, partners complained about each other, about providing funding, and about what this cooperation should look like in the future. The result is that CENTROPE is not operating anymore.

Similar to the times before CENTROPE, there has been a plethora of cross-border projects in the CENTROPE area, but covering much smaller territories and dealing with

sectoral issues (transportation and mobility, urban development and planning, and environmental issues). Though these are somewhat built on the debris of CENTROPE, the continuity of communication that CENTROPE offered is missing. It seems that perhaps the moment is not right for an initiative of the size and scope of CENTROPE. The way forward is rather viewed in relation to smaller and less ambitious projects, but with honest and realistic expectations and a common vision in some areas.

A list of past and current projects in the CENTROPE region includes: Project Jordes+ (2000-2006, 311,807.48 EUR); project EdTWIN (2008-2011, 2,200,000 EUR), INTERREG IIIA project Building a European Region, project CENTROPE Map (geoportal operating since 2007), CENTROPE TT (2009-2012, 1,747,003 EUR), CENTROPE Capacity (2009-2012, 4,515,462 EUR), Bratislava Umland Management BAUM 2020 project (2017-2020, 674,227 EUR), project KOBRA (2006-2007, 69,000 EUR).

Conclusions and Key Lessons reiterated for the Western Balkans

Central Europe and the Western Balkan have been in close contact for centuries. Some regions might even be labelled as overlapping both macroregional entities. Both territories have overcome major changes during the 1990s and 2000s. These changes were not only a consequence of geopolitical shifts in Europe, but they re-drew the mental maps of the inhabitants and (in some cases) heavily challenged their social identities. Regional identity, a sense of belonging toward certain territorial units, and socio-cultural milieus were modified, changed, and in some cases even contested. Although the new identities of many (now) cross-border regions and territories integrated common heritage from the past, they were also confronted with contradictions, resentments, and tensions. Several Western Balkan regions were influenced by partly contradictory issues: most of the countries have a centuries-old common regional history and/or identity characterised by a cultural melting pot.

However, turmoil in the last decade of the 20th century sowed some toxic notions in the public perception of their identity, common future, or collaborative patterns. Yet, in recent years, there are still some examples of good cross-border cooperation taking into consideration a common regional identity (the Istra peninsula, Croatian-Montenegrin cooperation on maritime and ecological issues, and the via Dinarica, among others).

Moreover, the Western Balkans is not one homogenous macro-region but rather a very manifold and unique metatext of different identities, narratives, and communities. The process of maintaining, developing, and enriching the regional identity of every Western Balkan region or city is not a finished task but a continuous process. Every case is different but the study of successful and unsuccessful processes of building a cross-border identity, place branding, regional image, and mutually compatible governance models always delivers very useful examples and case studies that might serve as an inspiration or warning for every European region.

We conclude the paper with eight key lessons learned from 17 years of CENTROPE's operation, which can serve as inspiration for regional identity management and territorial governance in the Western Balkans' cross-border regions:

1. Active communication towards the domestic audience (inhabitants, domestic SMEs) in terms of image building and maintaining is essential. CENTROPE did not manage to orient its communication activities towards local actors, who are the carriers of the tacit knowledge needed for brand and vision promotion. The active involvement of these actors is one of the preconditions of success. Authentic, spontaneous, and deep identification with the regional profile and positioning is necessary in order to be successful, especially in long-term. One of the key lessons for regions in the territory of the Western Balkans is that the underestimation of the domestic audience in branding and

- marketing activities can backfire, leading to a complete failure of the marketing strategy. profile and positioning is necessary in order to be successful, especially in long-term. One of the key lessons for regions in the territory of the Western Balkans is that the underestimation of the domestic audience in branding and marketing activities can backfire, leading to a complete failure of the marketing strategy.
2. Continuous and transparent re-evaluation of the vision is an essential corrective mechanism. A common and widely accepted vision is a living thing that needs to be re-evaluated and adjusted according to changing conditions (megatrends). Visions should be continuously enriched in terms of their emotional potential and ability to mobilize people. A regional vision is neither a prognosis nor audit, but should be a common denominator for all actors.
 3. Concentration on common interest and common goals encourages dedication to the process of harmonising political priorities. Building on points and themes of common interest is a way to foster mutual trust and sustainability of the cooperation. Competitive and cooperative elements must be in a balance, not fatally disturbing each other. Regions must be open to starting new partnerships, learning from best practices in various fields of action, and constantly upgrading their innovation potential.
 4. Flexibility is crucial in the reflecting on the overall socio-political climate (zeitgeist). Each historical or political period carries certain trends that are reflected in the public spirit and have the potential to impassion people. In the case of CENTROPE in 1990s, the region was focused on foreign investment, research, and technology. In the 2000s, it was EU integration that was raising spirits in all four countries and overshadowing the differences among the nations. This common denominator and grand narrative for cooperation is currently missing and is arguably one of the reasons for the lack of activity in recent years.
 5. Partners should mutually coordinate their activities and involve informal structures and channels. This is related to the coordination of activities in the framework of a good governance system, which accounts for both vertical and horizontal coordination of activities in the territory across borders. This system needs to be effective from the international level all the way down to the local/domestic level where the implementation of activities and projects takes place (the principle of subsidiarity). Governance systems need to integrate sectoral orientations together with a holistic vision.
 6. Parallel communication and cooperation structures can strengthen and complement official decision-making bodies. This way, the overall system is more robust and resilient to various types of vulnerabilities. Good peer-to-peer relations, common ties, and relationships beyond official channels might not only speed up the collaborative process, but can be an invaluable asset in times of crisis, misunderstanding, or external pressure. Language as the most important communication tool plays an important role. One of the advantages of many Western Balkan regions is the lack of language barriers.
 7. Initiatives should adopt a suitable cooperation dimension and scale. CENTROPE was a vast initiative (four countries, 16 cities and regions, 6 million people), which did not manage to accentuate a common vision and find common denominators upon which their cooperation could have been built. One of the main difficulties was the size and heterogeneity of actors. Therefore, it is important to find and build on common interests through a bottom-up approach (as opposed to EUSDR, for example). The

scale of cooperation might be different in each Western Balkan cross-border region.

8. Place branding should occur through actions rather than statements. More than an ambitious brand building process, it is important to create structures for pursuing the common interests of the actors within the cross-border regions. Despite having long periods of troublesome history and an array of conflicts in the Western Balkan region, the set of common interests in various practical fields is what counts at the end of the day. Specialised issues might include initiatives in fields like tourism and environmental protection (TG-WeB, 2018) or mobility, which could become the driving force of all the external communication of the region and shape its place branding. The active, versatile, and honest participation of various types of stakeholders is key for the resilience of the brand and its perceived, practical usability. Deep, thorough, and smart place branding of various regions in the Western Balkans could deliver efficient and sustainable marketing activities that go beyond the old clichés of beautiful nature, national parks, and gastronomy, for instance. A successful regional brand is always based upon a congruence of attitudes among internal actors (inhabitants) and the expectations of an external audience (such as tourists, visitors, and investors).

Notes

1. This is explained in more detail in the section about CENTROPE identity and place branding.
2. The countries have different administration systems and different forms and levels of decentralisation. Therefore, in cross-border level projects, success is based, above all, on good relations among the local authorities and the common project idea, which must be stronger than differences stemming from the various legal arrangements.

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