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Constructing the Carpathians: the Carpathian Convention and the Search for a Spatial Ideal

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the assumptions behind the purposefully-vague spatial definition of the area covered by the Carpathian Convention, pointing to the problematic aspects of defining such an entity. The intrinsically political nature of defining boundaries in space is stressed, including the difficulties of seeking a biophysical justification for a political project. The process leading to the birth of the Carpathian Convention is therefore analysed as it simultaneously constructs the idea of 'the Carpathians' as an entity in itself. This is linked to the potent and seductive metaphor of 'boundless nature' severed by political boundaries, promoted in the case of the Carpathians by a conglomerate of natural scientists, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and donor agencies. Rather than there being a split between 'nature' on one hand and 'politics' on the other, with negotiation between a biophysical ideal and a pragmatic political solution, it is argued that the very thing that is taken to be the object of environmental studies and politics – namely 'nature' – is an effect of power. The discussion is illustrated by an analysis of three maps produced during the negotiation phase.

On the 22nd May 2003, representatives for the governments of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland, Romania, the Council of Ministers of Serbia and Montenegro, the Slovak Republic and Ukraine signed the 'Final Act' establishing the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians. The signing ceremony followed months of negotiation and preparation, assisted and facilitated by the work of the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Regional Office for Europe, based in Geneva, Switzerland. This framework convention inspired by the Alpine Convention, is expected to be ratified in the coming months or years and will enter into force when at least four of the countries involved have ratified it. The Convention applies to "the Carpathian region (hereinafter referred to as the 'Carpathians'), to be defined by the Conference of the Parties" (Art. 1). This paper explores some of the assumptions behind this purposefully-vague spatial definition, pointing to the problematic aspects of defining such a region. In particular, the intrinsically political nature of the process is stressed, including the difficulties of seeking a biophysical justification for a political project. The discussion is illustrated by an analysis of three maps produced during the negotiation phase.

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Defining a 'region'?

Intuitively, it seems an excellent idea to promote the creation of legal instruments and frameworks to coordinate work within one mountain range that unquestionably faces a series of shared challenges and opportunities (see Samec 2002). This is in line with the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) that endorsed the 'ecosystem approach' as the primary framework for action (UNTS 3069, 1992). Later that year, the fourth World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas, held in Caracas, Venezuela, also seized upon the idea, further exploring the use of 'bioregions' as spatial models for applying the approach (see Miller 1999; Fall 2003). The concept of bioregion was further clarified on an international level during the fourth meeting of the CBD Conference of the Parties in February 2000 in Montreal. Since then, the bioregional concept has been promoted as the geographical equivalent of the Theory of Everything, the latest fashionable paradigm that will secure support and therefore new funding from untapped sources², leading to a number of international initiatives such as the World Wide Fund for Nature's (WWF) 'ecoregions' programme. While much of this is undoubtedly full of sense, the nitty-gritty of defining such 'regions' on the ground is more controversial. For while it may seem initially obvious to many where the 'Carpathians' start and end, drawing an uncontroversial line on a map is like stepping into a minefield. In practice, this means that the assumptions that guide how bioregions are bounded need to be addressed critically, case by case. The Carpathian Convention is therefore an interesting example of an attempt to graft a legal identity onto a portion of space defined by biophysical and socio-economic factors.

The bioregional idea has been seen to offer a basis for applying all the seemingly contradictory ideals of conservation, development, sustainable development, regional identity construction, political devolution and tourism promotion within one site defined primarily along biophysical criteria (McNeely 1993 : 9). It assumes that the earth can be divided into distinctive and discrete ecosystems, each system or region exhibiting a unique pattern of geographical characteristics and life forms, with corresponding human communities reflecting these 'natural' boundaries (Olsen 2001 : 73). Yet bioregionalism has also been criticised for "its reductionist understanding of natural regions and undifferentiated human societies, its frequently ahistorical analysis, the environmental determinism of its simplistic nature-culture causal linkage, and its romanticized representation of 'traditional' indigenous cultures living in harmony with the environment" (Wolmer 2003 : 264). However, the focus is usually not so much on the "utopian and slightly New Age rhetoric" (Wolmer 2003 : 264) but rather on the more explicitly scientific and managerial discourse deriving mainly from the field of conservation biology.

In the Carpathians, the precise area covered by the Convention is still unclear. Biophysical certainty is replaced by political wrangling. This has meant that in the absence of a precisely defined area, and to move the process on despite difficulties, it has been decided that what constitutes the 'Carpathian region' will be defined by the Conference of the Parties at a later date. Negotiations to reach this point took a little under one year – compared to almost ten years in the case of the Alpine Convention.

The idea of a Convention started to take shape within a declaration from the meeting on the Environment and Sustainable Development in the Danube-Carpathian region held in 2001. Following this, the first informal meeting for the preparation of the Carpathian Convention was held in Kyiv, Ukraine, in November 2001. This brought together governmental and non-governmental representatives as well as scientists. This was followed by five meetings in Bolzano (Italy), Vaduz (Liechtenstein), Geneva (Switzerland), Vienna (Austria) and Bolzano (Italy) again.

² For discussions of the concept of bioregion see for instance Maltby 1999; McNeely 1999; Miller 1999; UNESCO 2000; for a more critical position see Olsen 2001.

Subsequently, during the ninth meeting of Ministers of the Environment of the Visegrad Group countries in Kosice, Slovakia, on the 24-25th April 2003, a joint statement was issued by representatives of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Poland. This recognised that “the scope of application of the Framework Convention and any Protocol should be brought into line with general objectives and principles of the Convention, the Ministers agreed and recommended to decide on the geographical scope of the Convention at the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties, and request UNEP ROE to prepare the necessary proposals to that effect”. In effect, they rejected the first proposal as “too generic and not adequate as a geographical framework to address the various objectives and principles” (Frits Schlingemann, Director and Regional Representative, UNEP, *letter of 29th April 2003*).

In response to the need to define the area uncontroversially, UNEP drew on the work of Kapos et al. (2000), looking to scientists to provide a solution to a political puzzle. They tried to define mountain areas ‘scientifically’³, as part of the global trend of putting mountains on the (political) map, focussing on their universal singularity and creating an ‘agenda’ for mountains on an international level. One aspect of this work was the creation of a European map of mountain areas, in which mountains were defined by using “digital data on elevation and forest cover, first to define mountain areas by empirically testing combinations of elevation, slope and local elevation range” (Kapos et al. 2000). This appeal to technical processes opened up the possibility of creating maps as tools for defending political projects, using ‘scientific’ methods as neutral arbiters, drawing ‘natural’, non-controversial lines around mountains. These technologies have a dual appeal: techniques are used to help define the boundaries of the bioregion ‘rationally’ and are referred to subsequently to produce and legitimise maps which present it as a coherent unit. Yet science, rather than wholly neutral, is intrinsically political.

This use of maps and scientific methods are not surprising since many proponents of the bioregional approach stem from a natural science background. It must be recognised however that maps, rather than being uncontroversial products of a ‘rational’ process are instead profoundly political objects. In order to ground the analysis of the maps accompanying the different drafts of the Carpathian Convention, some theoretical elements relating to maps are introduced in the following paragraphs. This exploration of theoretical elements is followed by a discussion of three maps defining the area within which the Carpathian Convention will be applied.

Mapping a ‘region’?

Maps are part of the technical infrastructure necessary for the governance of space (Ò Tuathail 1996 : 4). Consequently, cartography and maps have played a central part in the construction of the ‘Carpathians’ as a discursive entity. This suggests that the study of maps assists in unveiling some of the problematic aspects of regional transformation, when desired constructions of space are promoted and contested.

The function of conventional cartography is to transform space into a legible, ordered territory, thereby institutionalising it. However, maps are more than simple tools for the control of space as they are imbued with power relations (Crampton 2001 : 235). A map is instead a representation that belongs to the terrain of the social world in which it is produced (Harley 1989 : 1), creating an ‘élite discourse’ (Perkins 2003 : 344). This means that “rather than being mirrors, maps are cultural texts, which construct the world rather than reproduce it” (Woods 1992 in Paasi 1996 : 20). They are political instruments of power that participate in the (re)territorialisation of the area mapped by dividing up space into seemingly-coherent entities. As

³ For another discussion of attempts to define mountains ‘scientifically’, see Fall 2001.

Harley notes, “much of the power of the map, as a representation of social geography, is that it operates behind a mask of a seemingly neutral science. It hides and denies its social dimensions at the same time as it legitimates” (Harley 1989 : 3). This echoes Latour’s arguments on the construction of scientific knowledge when he states that “knowledge does not reflect a real external world that it resembles via mimesis, but rather a real interior world, the coherence and continuity of which it helps to ensure” (Latour 1999 : 58). A map (‘knowledge’) is not neutral, but rather reflects a wider web of relations called on to construct it.

Historically, this legitimisation has taken several forms. Maps have participated in the *mise-en-scène* of the geopolitical gaze, what Ô Tuathail calls the art of setting a stage scene or arranging a pictorial representation, using a mechanism of theatrical illusion comprising two different stage domains or stage levels: “on one hand a physical / climatological / geographical / material / spatial / natural (back)ground to the stage, while, distinct from this, we have a human / historical / temporal / political / cultural foreground or surface of appearances” (Ô Tuathail 1996 : 30). This geopolitical gaze was all the rage during the first half of the last century, finding favour with authors such as Halford Mackinder, Nicolas Spykman and Karl Haushofer, in a form of Cartesian perspectivalism with a detached viewing subject surveying a worldwide stage. Harley argues that this idea of an all-seeing eye pervades cartography, since “cartographers manufacture power: they create a spatial panopticon” (Harley 1989 : 8).

This geopolitical heritage in cartography is important in the historical process of reifying maps as explanatory representations and icons, justified as objective by reference to their ‘natural’ rootedness, in true positivist fashion. Raffestin notes that “the representation ensures the *mise-en-scène*, the organisation of the original grasp of power as a show (...). The image or model, that is to say any construction of reality, is an instrument of power and has been since the earliest days of mankind (...). We have even turned images into ‘objects’ as such and, with time, have got used to transforming these images, mere simulations of the original objects, rather than transforming or acting upon the objects themselves. Therefore, is it surprising that we manipulate them, have manipulated them and will continue to manipulate them ever more?”⁴ (Raffestin 1980 : 130-131). This idea of performance is interesting, and has been amply developed – often confusingly – by a variety of authors following Derrida’s ideas of deconstruction (Dewsbury et al. 2002), sometimes to the point of oblivion. These approaches suggest a performance (such as a map) always reflects choices. As Campbell argues on the subject of maps of partitioned Bosnia, “importantly, these performative practices of representation do not simply ‘imagine’ one assemblage of identity; they also un-imagine another” (Campbell 1999 : 401). In other words, representational practices serve a double function: they bring into being one conception by simultaneously removing another.

The process applied here can broadly be assimilated to deconstruction, in which maps are considered as ‘texts’. But while inspired by Derrida’s ideas, the more literary turns of deconstruction are avoided, “engaging not only geopolitical texts but also the historical, geographical, technological, and sociological contexts within which these texts arise and gain social meaning and persuasive force” (Ô Tuathail 1996 : 73). Certainly, as Harley notes, “‘text’ is certainly a better metaphor for maps than the mirror of nature” (Harley 1989 : 4). If maps are taken to be ‘texts’, then Harley argues that it is possible to analyse maps precisely as rhetorical texts. While all this sounds fair and well, the next stage is not necessarily obvious. On a very

⁴ Free translation from: “la représentation assure la mise en scène, l’organisation en spectacle de l’emprise originelle du pouvoir (...). L’image ou modèle, c’est-à-dire toute construction de la réalité, est un instrument de pouvoir et ce depuis les origines de l’homme (...). Nous avons même fait de l’image un ‘objet’ en soi et nous avons pris l’habitude, avec le temps, d’agir plus sur les images, simulacres des objets, que sur les objets eux-mêmes. Dès lors, faut-il s’étonner que nous les manipulions, que nous les ayons manipulées et que nous les manipulerons toujours davantage?”

practical level, how should a graphical object be ‘deconstructed’? Crampton fleetingly hints at the possible use of semiotics (Crampton 2001 : 40, see also Ferras and Hussey 1991). For Harley, the deconstruction of maps “was a heterogeneous amalgam of approaches” (Crampton 2001 : 241), the objective of which was to ‘read between the lines’ of a map. Yet Harley’s death did not allow him to provide a viable research agenda or method for carrying this out.

Before leading on to a practical application of these ideas, a note of caution is useful. Taking maps to be representations is to make quite a strong assumption about the role of the person actually designing them. Curiously, none of the authors cited above has anything to say about the actual cartographer’s role as an artist making choices of colour, layout or graphics. Some of these choices are bound to be arbitrary or simply to reflect a series of artistic choices. It is assumed that these individual choices reflect an elusive social reality, as though the artist were simply a channel through which this is revealed. When a map is produced, the fancy of the cartographer – who may or may not have professional training in the design of maps – is bound to play a role, as are the technical means at his or her disposal. Yet, because maps are not only the result of social reality but also the means of constructing and institutionalising it, these individual choices are integrated into the object itself. The map becomes an icon, recognized by others, constructing and institutionalising a facet of social space.

Three maps: negotiation, science and politics

In order to further explore the link between the search for an ‘ideal’ bioregion, defined rationally through a scientific process and the actual application of this on the ground, this next section examines three maps produced by UNEP to illustrate and define the area to be covered by the Carpathian Convention.

The first map illustrating the “Scope of Application of the ‘Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention)’ according to its Article 1, paragraph 1” was produced by UNEP/DEWA/GRID-Geneva in January 2003 (Figure 1), several months before the expected signing of the Convention. Nestling up to Austria’s eastern border to the west, the bulk of the area defined lay in Romania, with sizeable portions covering much of Slovakia, parts of Poland and Ukraine as well as smaller areas in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Yugoslavia. The section in Yugoslavia, rather amusingly, was defined manually by the cartographer following a line that appeared in an edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica that happened to be on his desk... The part within Romania accounted for over half the total area. This map was submitted to the State Parties, who commented and submitted comments on changes.

Three months later, as a result of the comments, the map had changed substantially (Figure 2). The first difference was the huge decrease in the area defined within Romania. Instead of covering a large portion of the country, the defined area was reduced to a U-shaped sliver surrounding the towns of Cluj-Napoca and Târgu Mures. One explanation for this drastic reduction was the proposed idea of linking physical extent to financial contributions for funding the Secretariat, another was the fear of jeopardising future development around these industrial towns. The Carpathian Convention is modelled on the Alpine Convention which calculates financial contributions for the State Parties using a formula combining the geographical surface, the human population and national gross domestic product (GDP). Therefore a reduction in size is likely to decrease Romania’s ultimate financial contribution to the running of the Secretariat. The second substantial change was the increase in detail in the location of the boundary to the defined area. Furthermore, ‘Yugoslavia’ was renamed ‘Serbia and Montenegro’, with the capital city of Beograd appearing explicitly. Other more discrete changes included a reduction of the areas within the Czech Republic and Poland as well as a slight increase of the area within Ukraine. A month later, in April 2003, a third map was produced tracking the changes (Figure 3). These

substantial changes suggested that the maps told ambiguous and politically charged stories, as they aptly reflected the prevalent tensions taking place within the negotiation process as a whole. None of these changes reflected any biophysical characteristic: the mountains had not moved overnight. Instead, all the changes were due to political opportunism and calculation.

By the time the third map had appeared, a split over the use of terms such as 'Carpathian mountain region' and 'Carpathian region' had emerged between Romania and Hungary, both understood substantially differently in each respective country. This led the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Romania to issue a statement noting that "the Government of Romania considers the term 'Carpathian region' in article 1, paragraph 1 (...) as designating the Carpathian mountain area, which is defined, on the territory of Romania, in accordance with physico-geographical and biological criteria, as well as socio-economic criteria related to a reduced land use potential and to the relationship of the local population with the specific physical environmental features, and also in conformity with the criteria of the European Community regarding the delimitation of alpine bio-geographical regions (...)" (Geoană 2003, *unpublished*). This same definition was finally appended to the Convention as a 'reservation', indicating the formal position adopted by Romania on this point. This legal and political argument was in contrast to the Hungarian position that systematically called for a 'scientific' definition of the area.

A further sticking point in the negotiations relates to the future location of the Secretariat. Throughout the negotiations, the actual coordinative work was carried out from Geneva, removed from the region. The Carpathian Convention however endorses the establishment of a Secretariat to coordinate the work. As with the Alpine Convention, the actual location of this is disputed and has not yet been agreed upon. Both Ukraine and Romania have submitted proposals to host the Secretariat and this remains undecided. Thus choosing what is to be the symbolic 'centre' of the region is again a highly contested political process.

Nature, regional transformation and transboundary spaces

In contrast to suggestions that spatial entities such as bioregions emerge as "logical management zones" (Brunckhorst and Rollings 1999 : 62), this example of the Carpathian Convention has highlighted the contested nature of defining politicised spatial entities along biophysical lines. The assumption is that such entities already exist and are waiting to be identified and administered as management units, within a suitable legal framework, rather than being areas defined by human subjectivity. Yet resistance to this 'biophysical coercion' was swift. Although the idea of constructing a legal identity for a mountain area within an international Convention was sound and was welcomed as politically opportune by the countries involved, much of the actual definition of the area followed political and socio-economic arguments, rather than biophysical ones. This might seem rather banal, were it not for the continuing yet dangerous attraction of using 'scientific' arguments to settle political disputes. Fleeting images of 'natural' boundaries are rarely far off when such issues are discussed, hinting at the continuing belief that paradoxically while nature 'knows no boundaries', it also contains within it the basis of a political scenario that can be identified by an appropriately rational process.

The stories behind the creation of maps of the area covered by the Carpathian Convention uncovered some of the resistance to the coercive nature of bioregional planning. Uncontroversial 'natural' definitions of the Carpathian region were contested and lines were modified over huge stretches on the maps, despite the mountains remaining in place on the ground. In the discussion, it was noted that the power of maps resided behind the mask of seemingly neutral science. By hiding and denying their social dimensions, maps further legitimated their position as arbiter. By becoming icons and symbols of an integrated area, these maps implicitly transformed a representation of reality into reality itself. Areas defined were thus doubly legitimised: both by the technical process of defining the area 'rationally' and by its subsequent representation upon a

map. Yet, as intrinsically political creations, and as an imposition of power, these scenarios were contested.

Naturalising metaphors appear frequently in writings about new forms of political organisation and legal frameworks such as the Carpathian Convention, however 'soft' they may be in actual legal terms. The potent and seductive metaphor of boundless nature severed by political boundaries, a green version of the 'borderless world' myth, was promoted in the case of the Carpathians by a conglomerate of unusual bedfellows including natural scientists, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and donor agencies. Yet rather than there being a split between 'nature' on one hand and 'politics' on the other, with negotiation between a biophysical ideal and a pragmatic political solution, it must be recognised that "the very thing that is taken to be the object of environmental studies and politics – namely 'nature' – is an effect of power" (Braun & Wainwright 2001 : 41). The process leading to the birth of the Carpathian Convention, constructed as a new legal tool by a political process, simultaneously constructed the idea of 'the Carpathians' as an entity in themselves. New partnerships and links across existing political divisions are one result of this process.

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