The institutionalization of the alpine region: an analysis based on a study of two pan-alpine networks (Alliance in the Alps and Alparc)

Cristina Del Biaggio

Université de Genève, département de géographie
Cristina.DelBiaggio@unige.ch

Abstract : This article attempts to show, through an analysis of two pan-alpine networks, Alliance in the Alps and Alparc, how the Alps are in the process of becoming institutionalized and emerging as a transnational region. This endeavour requires above all an understanding of how these networks function as well as an appreciation of the major challenges facing those involved in projects in this innovative process. The process is taking place at the scale of the entire alpine arc and is contributing to recognition of the Alps as a region in its own right in the European territorial mosaic.

Keywords : Pan-alpine networks, Alliance in the Alps, Alparc, regionalism, Alpine Convention, Interreg IIIB, Alpine Space, sustainable development, protection of natural environment, regional institutionalisation.

● ●

„Ich sehe immer die Alpen
wie einen Alpenbogen.
Wir sind eingebunden"[1]
(Mayor of member commune of Alliance in the Alps)

I n recent years, the Alps has become increasingly recognised as a region in its own right within Europe, namely through the signing of an international treaty, the Convention on the protection of the Alps (or Alpine Convention). The aim of this agreement is to promote sustainable development and protection of the alpine environment. Signed in 1991 by the countries concerned[2], it was promoted by the CIPRA (Commission Internationale pour la Protection des Alpes), a non-government organisation set up in 1952 whose goal today is the safeguard of cultural and natural diversity in the Alps through a policy of sustainable development[3]. According to Jörg Balsiger, it represents *a*

---

1 • Translation by author: "I always see the Alps as an alpine arc. We are linked" (Personal notes taken on 15.06.07 while attending the General Assembly of Alliance in the Alps, Switzerland)

2 • The Convention was signed and ratified by the eight alpine countries and the European Union; some countries did not ratify the different protocols (namely Switzerland and Italy). For more information on the state of ratification: www.alpconv.org/theconvention/conv03_fr.htm (consulted 06.04.09)

3 • For the history and more information on this movement, see the articles by Price (1999) and Balsiger (2007).

case of 'ecoregional institutionalization' (Balsiger, 2007 : 4), whereby the alpine region, in his eyes, is becoming institutionalized on the basis of an area defined by the Alpine Convention.

Another important step in the "top down" identification of the alpine massif was reached with the European programme *"Alpine Space"*, the first phase of which (2000-2006) was integrated in the Interreg IIIB programme. Its aim was to increase the attractiveness of the alpine area or "space", promote sustainable development, improve the accessibility of the Alps, and protect its cultural and natural heritage. The second phase (2007-2013) is pursuing the objectives of the first by focusing on growth, employment and sustainable development.

These initiatives have been accompanied by a "bottom up" mobilisation of inhabitants, local representatives, researchers, managers of protected areas, and ecological associations, which has often taken the form of networks of actors sharing a concern for ensuring that the objectives of the Alpine Convention materialize. Most networks promote sustainable development and horizontal methods of exchange, and, together, participate in helping the Alps to exist as a reference area for collective action.

The CIPRA has played a decisive role in linking together these two types of initiatives by promoting "top-down" development through the Convention, completed by projects involving the base, namely through the creation of alpine networks. The alpine region is thus taking shape and becoming institutionalised under this two-fold impetus (top-down and bottom-up links through the initiatives of different actors) and constitutes one of these trans-border regions that contribute to the *"shift from a one-dimensional map of Europe as having fixed borders to one in which city-based, regional, national, and European scales of action are fluid"* (McNeill, 2004: 89). As Donal McNeill explains, the scales of action are changing, becoming more fluid, and leaving room for new initiatives, which may take the form, as in the case of the Alps, of networks of actors using the alpine area as their preferred area of operation. Regions should not therefore be considered as a fixed territory, but as a dynamic space that is developing and *"constantly evolving"* (Pudup, 2004: 12908) under the influence of social relations. The latter are central in regional analysis, for *"[the region] has no existence outside the social relations that it mediates"* (Gilbert, 1988: 215).

Thus regions must be interpreted *"as both resources for, and the outcomes of, human action"* (Painter, 2008: 343). This article attempts to explain how this applies to the Alps. The idea that actors involved in the pan-alpine networks have of the Alps, namely the importance they attribute to sustainable development, influences their involvement, but through their involvement it is a new alpine region that materialises.

While contributing to a more general reflection on the emergence of new European regions during public debates on territorial governance, this paper aims above all to illustrate how these "bottom up" initiatives function and to examine their objectives and some of their major issues, an exercise that no researcher has, for the moment, carried out in an exhaustive manner. It thus seeks to compensate for the shortcomings of the literature on regionalism identified by Jörg Balsiger, who asserts that: *"much of the literature on regional international politics has been based on a state-centric view that fails*

to consider the increasingly autonomous agency of subnational actors that cooperate across borders" (Balsiger, 2007 : 10). It is hoped that this article will provide a voice for those actors working at the pan-alpine scale.

In order to understand the issues associated with the emergence of the alpine region, it is important to identify how the actors involved in the networks, one of the new strengths of the alpine arc, are working and participating in the construction of the alpine region. The article therefore underlines the role of the network actors and discusses the motivations of their involvement and the difficulties of this method of operation. As already mentioned, sustainable development is a key concept in the creation of these networks. The paper will therefore analyse what is at stake in taking this into account, particularly in relation to the protection of the natural environment. Finally, we will consider the political strategies of the networks and the role exercised by the State. These analyses reveal the mechanisms underlying the construction of the *"regional institutional architecture"* (Balsiger, 2007 : 5) of the Alps. The networks studied here thus contribute to the recognition and the institutionalization of the Alps as *"a region with distinct environmental and cultural characteristics, of considerable importance at the European scale"* (PRICE, 1999: 88), a territory that the actors studied here have undertaken to promote and invest their time and energy in.

Survey methodology and brief presentation of networks

The article concerns two networks of actors, the Alliance in the Alps (Network of communes to promote sustainable development) and Alparc (Alpine Network of Protected Areas). These are the subject of an ongoing study[4], based on a methodology involving three methods: a questionnaire survey, complementary interviews to provide further information on the trends observed in analysing the questionnaires[5], observations at official meetings and manifestations organised by the networks[6]. The questionnaire was sent to every member of the Alliance in the Alps (AdA) and Alparc[7].

4 • Title of study, financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation: 'Pan-Alpine Networks': Analyse des réseaux d'acteurs et d'institutions à l'échelle des Alpes en rapport avec la Convention Alpine (2006-2009). It was also financed by the Fondation Boninchi (2006-07) as part of the project "Mountain communities in global and regional networks: History, objectives and functions of mountain community networks in the world since 1990".

5 • For the AdA, the mayors of network member communes (2 areas were given preference, the Malcantone region in Switzerland and the Grosses Walsertal in Austria, since they seemed to be emblematic cases with regard to the differences in their questionnaire responses) and those responsible for the network were interviewed. For Alparc, park rangers were interviewed during the Danilo Re Trophy, and, later, interviews were conducted with those responsible for the network and with park managers in order to complement the information obtained in the questionnaire responses.

6 • Data obtained in the Alparc and Danilo Re Trophy questionnaire were analysed by Petra Arnuš. A summary of intermediate results on the AdA is available at: www.alpenallianz.org/fr/service-dinformation/telecharger (consulted 15.10.08).

7 • For AdA: 258 questionnaires distributed, 89 useable responses. For Alparc: 170 questionnaires distributed, 68 useable responses.

An additional survey based on a questionnaire and interviews was conducted with park rangers during a sporting event, the Danilo Re Trophy[8], in March 2007[9].

Alparc was created in 1995 as a contribution to the Alpine Convention. It was first set up under the name of "Réseau Alpin des Espaces Protégés" (Alpine Network of Protected Areas) by the French government. Since 2007, it has been known as Alparc and comes under the Secrétariat permanent of the Alpine Convention. This change took place through the creation of the "Task force of protected areas" within the Convention. The network brings together all the alpine protected areas (more than 900 areas of more than 100 hectares), whose membership is automatic and free. Altogether, these protected areas cover some 25% of the territory defined by the Alpine Convention. The main aim of Alparc is to "share know-how, techniques and management methods for alpine protected areas"[10]; the promotion of exchanges is thus one of the essential elements of its mandate.

AdA was set up in Bovec (Slovenia) in 1997, under the impetus of the CIPRA. The network currently includes more than 200 communes in the eight alpine countries[11], which work with their citizens to make the alpine arc an area for living in and an area with a future[12]. Membership of the AdA is neither automatic nor free, but must be motivated and justified by concrete projects. For the communes concerned, "the Alpine Convention provides a basis for work and a guiding line towards sustainable development in the Alps"[13]. The implementation of a sustainable development policy constitutes one of the network's major objectives.

Network operation: pan-alpine actors and the basic role

The AdA and Alparc networks have benefited from the organisational skills of some particularly active and enthusiastic members. These personalities were instrumental in setting up the networks, have always been very much involved in network projects, and are still active in the management structure today. Their contribution is an asset for the efficient operation of the networks but also conceals a major danger, that of the personalisation of these associations. The President of the AdA is aware of this and would like to have a larger group of management personnel, so that acquired knowledge and expertise does not disappear when there is a resignation. For the moment, according to him, those at the head of the network would be difficult to replace.[14]

---

8 • This is a sports competition between park rangers organised every year by Alparc. The competition is supplemented by debates on themes of professional interest for rangers. It is held in memory of a ranger who died while on duty. Protected areas of every alpine country are represented.

9 • The questionnaire was completed by 77 participants at the event.

10 • www.alparc.org/presentation (consulted 22.10.08)

11 • Austria, Slovenia, Germany, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Italy, France and Monaco.

12 • www.alpenallianz.org/fr/sur-alliance-dans-les-alpes (consulted 15.10.08)

13 • www.alpenallianz.org/fr/sur-alliance-dans-les-alpes (consulted 15.10.08)

14 •   Interview conducted by C. Del Biaggio and B. Debarbieux with M. Siegele (Personal communication, Mäder, 11.06.07).

The fact of having a small active group at the head of these networks also raises the question of whether it is possible for the networks to expand towards their base, meaning towards their members as well as the population in general. To answer this question requires, in the case of the AdA, examining the level of implication of the population (real and desired). Although, according to 75% of questionnaire responses, it is important to involve the population in these projects, the interviews conducted with the mayors and officials of the AdA show that the importance of this issue is perceived in very different ways. The most dynamic communes in the network attach particular importance to the participation (often festive) of the population. Mäder (Austria) and Budoia (Italy) are excellent examples of this. However, generally the population today knows very little about the network and the people I asked seemed to be divided in their opinions regarding the benefits of greater public participation and the responsibilities of each in this discussion: "*If I have to be sincere, the population is not informed, or only very little … […] This could be a negative point, that only the mayors are informed*"[15]. Another mayor admitted that, "*the thing is limited more to the level of the commune's administration and very little to that of the population. […] There's still a lot to do (by mayors) regarding informing the population (translation)*"[16]. Network officials and commune officials do not agree on this point. Thus an official of the AdA suggests that "*the political decision-makers should, over time, speak about the AdA with their population. […] Even if the network is not meant for that and it would mean more work for us to do. […] If we manage to develop instruments that would make the task easier for the communes*"[17]; on the other hand, another mayor replied that "*very spontaneously, [he] doesn't think it's important that people know [the AdA]. The AdA is for exchanges between communes. For the population, it's not important to know whom the information comes from. For the population, it's all the same; all they want is for things to advance, that it's done properly. […]*"[18]. This shows the ambivalence of remarks and the difficulty for the association to know if the project should remain at the level of the decision-makers or should be extended to the general population.

The same observation may be made for Alparc, where only a few protected areas are particularly active in the different working groups and in the administrative structure of the network. Indeed, 38% of respondents declared that they attended international meetings organised by Alparc regularly or as often as possible, as opposed to 62% who had never attended or who had "attended at least once".

15 •   Interview on 12.06.07 with mayor of member commune of AdA (originally translated from German by author).
16 •   Interview on 13.06.07 with mayor of member commune of AdA (originally translated from German by author).
17 •   Interview on 11.06.07 with member of AdA (originally translated from German by author).
18 •   Interview on 14.06.07 with mayor of member commune of AdA (originally translated from German by author).

Does your protected area participate in the international meetings organised by Alparc? (Choose only one response from the 4 possibilities)	Survey of managers (67 replies)
Never	24
At least once	17
Regularly	16
As often as possible	10

Tableau 1 : Participation in international meetings

Analysis of the responses of Alparc members provides similar results to those obtained for the AdA regarding the participation of park staff and the population. Indeed, for three quarters of the protected areas, the most active person in the network is the park director, who attaches little or no importance to the involvement of his staff or that of the population:

Would you agree to getting your staff involved in Alpine cooperative arrangements? (Choose only one response from the 3 possibilities)	Your staff	The population
As often as	16	5
From time to time	30	17
Not really	16	39

Tableau 2 : Involvement of staff in alpine cooperative arrangements

However, the survey conducted among *rangers* during the Danilo Re Trophy reveals the willingness of the latter to have more exchanges with other alpine countries and with protected areas throughout the world

Analyses for both networks indicate a limited capacity (and/or willingness) of the networks to inspire the active participation of the network base, even though park rangers appear quite willing to participate in more international exchanges.

Would you like to have more exchanges with: (You may choose more than 1 response if you wish)	77 respondents
Rangers in protected areas throughout the world	53
Alpine park rangers	47
Alpine park rangers in my country	19
No, it's OK as it is	5

Tableau 3 : Willingness to have more exchanges

Motivations for membership and difficulties encountered

The reasons for getting involved in the networks seem to be clearly identified by the different actors and reflect the objectives of the networks. Members of the AdA who replied to the questionnaire mention the promotion of sustainable development as well as an exchange of experiences between alpine communes as being the main reasons for joining the network [19]:

Reasons for joining AdA

- 3 % / 32 % / 65 % — Implement principes principles of DD
- 4 % / 57 % / 39 % — Share real experiences concrètes in field of DD

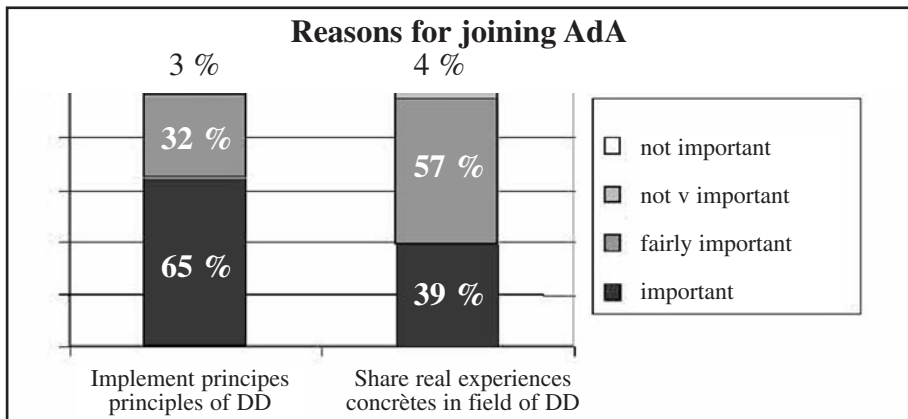Legend: not important / not v important / fairly important / important

Table 4: Reasons for joining AdA

19 •   Question: "For what reasons did your commune decide to join the Alliance in the Alps?" Different possible responses were then proposed to interviewees who were asked to rate them as being: "not important", "not very important", "fairly important", or "important".

105

These responses correspond to objectives of the network itself. Alparc members identified the sharing of experiences between parks as an important objective of the network[20]. For both networks, there does not therefore appear to be any difference between the priorities identified by network officials and those identified by their members.

In several interviews, the actors observe that the Alps constitute a "community of problems" that must be faced together, and that this is done namely by individual entities joining an international network. One member of the AdA declared: "*The advantage of an alliance is that it enables you to rediscover and present territories which started with the same problems and have found solutions for them*"[21]. Joining a network therefore enables concrete solutions to be found to common problems (mobility, climate change, etc.), an observation that Martin Price also makes. He asserts that in the alpine arc it is understood that "*many issues cannot be solved only through national legislation; coordinated regional approaches and initiatives are essential to solve common problems*" (Price, 1999: 88).

The network makes it possible to reach this objective regardless of cultural and linguistic barriers. Alparc and AdA have always made a concerted effort with translations and interpretations; this effort seems to have been rewarded by the results obtained in the questionnaire. There are only a very few actors who identify linguistic difficulties as being a major obstacle to exchanges. However, the interviews qualify this consensus: for some actors, the variety of alpine languages does indeed represent a problem. The actors seem to be unanimous in their view that the considerable distances they have to cover in the alpine arc and the lack of personnel in administrative structures constitute the major obstacle to more regular meetings. The setting up of internet platforms was meant to provide a means of getting round this problem of distance. However, certain mayors admit to not using this means. The data obtained from the questionnaire survey are no more encouraging: only 11% of respondents belonging to the AdA declared using the web site very regularly, as opposed to 34% who stated that they had never used it or that they had simply used it "at least once":

20 •   Question: "For what reasons is it important that your protected area belongs to Alparc?" Respondents were then presented with possible reasons and asked to rate their importance.
21 •   Interview of 06.06.07 (originally translated from Italian by author).

Do you regularly use the AdA web site?	*88 responses*
Never	15
At least once	14
Occasionally	45
Very regularly	10
No reply	4

Table 5: Use of AdA web site

For Alparc, the question was more generally concerned with communication tools, but the results appear similar: 37% of respondents declared consulting these tools never or only rarely, as opposed to 27% who used them regularly:

Does your Protected Area use Alparc communication tools regularly: web site, proceedings, dossiers, news bulletins, brochures and other publications	*(67 responses)*
Never	9
Rarely	16
Occasionally	24
Very regularly	18

Table 6: Use of Alparc communication tools

Using the Internet site as a realistic alternative to travelling the considerable distances within the alpine area does not therefore appear to be sufficiently exploited by Alparc's members. Furthermore, members also state that it is often difficult for them to personally participate in events.

The dilemma between sustainable development and protection of the natural environment

The networks were designed to promote sustainable development and in the hope that the Convention's policies would materialise in the form of practical actions in the field. As we have seen, the concept of sustainable development was integrated not only by the officials of the AdA but also by those of Alparc.

Thus although Alparc, by virtue of its mandate, is more concerned with protection of the natural environment, the word "sustainable development" is written in its statutes and often pronounced by its representatives. The setting up of the "Ecological networks" project[22] illustrates the concern for taking both concepts into account. The positive observation that 25% of the alpine territory benefits from protection thanks to the development of parks is qualified by the fact that the parks are generally situated at high altitudes and that the valleys are under-represented. This situation has encouraged the network to set up ecological corridors, devoted to sustainable development, between the parks. The alpine parks seem to be aware that a purely protectionist perspective must be forsaken in order to find new allies in projects promoting sustainable development, a concept that constitutes the motor for action at the alpine regional scale.

The Interreg "Palpis" project, devoted to drawing up a transborder management plan in the Italo-Slovenian Julian Alps[23], is a good example of this type of commitment in favour of a idea linked to sustainable development in the Alps. The sentiments of the head of the scientific branch of the Triglav Park on this subject are clear: the aim of this project is to find a way of bringing together sustainable development and protection of the natural environment. The Project Bulletin underlines the fact that through this management plan "man should adopt measures and territorial subdivisions for nature conservation, which are not against man"[24]. Having said that, during an interview with a local actor working for the Grosses Walsertal region, which is a member of both networks, the difference between the two structures became apparent: AdA focuses on "*regional development and the quality of life in the municipalities*" while in the Alparc projects "*protection of the natural environment is stronger*"[25].

At Alparc's General Assembly[26], many participants stressed the fact that the vision of parks is in the process of changing, with greater importance being attached to sustainable development, while at the same time, within the framework of the Interreg Alpencom project, which concerns putting in place common communication tools, Alparc has produced postcards strongly evoking an "untouched" natural environment in need of protection. An example is shown Figure 1 (See p. 98).

---

22 • For more information, see brochure Réseau écologique transfrontalier (Transborder ecological network), published by Alparc in 2004, or the internet sites: http://fr.alparc.org/nos-actions/an-ecological-network-in-the-alps and www.cipra.org/fr/alpmedia/nouveautes/3024 (consulted 06.04.09). The project is one of the priorities of the Alparc action programme for the years 2009-2010.
23 • Information on this subject can be found in an article written by the Director of the Parco Prealpi Giulie, on page 4 of the Journal: www.parcoprealpigiulie.org/notiziario/24_Aprile_2007.pdf and on the site : www.palpis.org (consulted 21.10.08).
24 • Originally translated and adapted from the Italian by the author. Taken from: "PALPIS. Un progetto per decidere insieme il futuro del nostro territorio", Palpis News, n°1, January 2006: www.palpis.org/documenti/palpisnews1.pdf (consulted 21.10.08)
25 • Interview of 12.06.07 (originally translated from German by author)
26 • General Assembly in Bled, Slovenia (8-12.09.08).

The difficulty in respecting both these visions of the natural environment, which are already written into the objectives of the *Alpine Space* programme mentioned in the introduction, is therefore clear. The alpine actors seem to be looking for an effective means of coupling together protection of the natural environment and sustainable development, because they have realised that "*a strict separation of natural and cultural landscapes was not possible in the Alps, and hence that it was necessary to develop an instrument that would embed conservation in the larger context of sustainable development*" (Balsiger, 2007: 17).

The dilemma between technical link and political influence

There is a particularly lively debate currently going on in the AdA. According to its President, the association would increase its political clout if it succeeded in obtaining 10% of the alpine population, 10% of the territory, 10% of the communes represented[27], since, as a mayor stressed during an interview, "*if there are more members, we will be taken more seriously*"[28]. Opinions differ on this point since, for some, this quest for greater numbers should not be an objective in itself, it being more important to have very active and committed members within its ranks[29]. The discussion at the General Assembly of the Swiss section of the AdA in 2007[30] clearly demonstrated this. Although for some observers the network should help in discussions and the preparation of projects (and thus in obtaining funding), for others the AdA should exercise its political muscle and make a clearer stance in order to ensure that the Alpine Convention can truly become a voice to be heard or, as a mayor pointed out, "*to ensure that the Alps are able to survive*"[31].

Although the strategic choice appears difficult, opinion is just as divided with regard to the political influence that the networks and the Convention currently enjoy at the national and international levels. According to one official of the Convention, "*the political importance of the Alpine Convention has decreased. Today, it is as low as it has ever been […]. There is a crisis at the macro (alpine) level and, at the same time, an increased need to act at the micro level […]. The networks are doing the work that the states should be doing. The states should be applying the Alpine Convention, but they are not doing that, so the networks do it*"[32]. The opinion of certain actors working at the micro level is less negative, as evidenced by this testimony from a mayor: "*I think there's a model that is clear in the AdA; […] it involves the […] strengthening of the small communes; this structuring of the alpine*

---

27 •   Interview conducted by C. Del Biaggio and B. Debarbieux with M. Siegele (Personal notes, Mäder, 11.06.07).

28 •   Interview of 12.06.07 with a mayor of a member commune of the AdA (translated from original German by author)

29 •   Personal notes of 11.06.08 after discussion with an AdA official.

30 •   This took place in Flühli (Switzerland) in June 07.

31 •   Personal notes (General Assembly of Swiss AdA, Flühli, 15.06.07)

32 •   Interview of 11.10.08 in Bled (translated by author)

communes is good. […] It's a sort of workers' union, that's how I see the AdA for the small communes. There are a lot of things that take place beforehand that have a political weight, a union of several alpine communes … We could do more … We could use it more [our political strength], do more at the European level. [All the communes together] are trying to reach a goal, which is simply to strengthen and protect the alpine communes […]. Looking at it this way, it's possible to have more weight at the European level[33]. A representative of Alparc seems to share this opinion: "*We are recognised by the pan-European ecological networks as an alpine region. […] This represents a certain acknowledgement, even if only a beginning, by Europe too. With regard to the ecological networks and the idea of working on these topics at the level of the Alpine region as a whole, that's something that's accepted. […] At the Alpine Convention, they have created an "ecological networks" platform. This shows that even at the political level, the subject is considered sufficiently important to merit treatment in a transalpine approach. […] The Alps have become recognised in their own right*"[34].

The debate surrounding this question is particularly important since it concerns defining the role of the networks, the primary objective of which is the sharing of experience. However, certain actors would seem to want to go beyond simple exchanges on technical points and to develop a political voice for the Alps that reaches beyond its frontiers to the level of the state and even the European Union.

Compatibility between national issues and transnational interests

Despite the differences characterising both networks, the element that reunites them is the international link between local actors. The actors involved in these projects juggle with different geographical levels: the local, international and European supranational levels. The latter is called upon particularly for project funding. In this context, the national level seems to be hidden, or left to one side. It is rarely mentioned in the discourses and practices of network members.

Notwithstanding the willingness and conscience of the actors to work together at the pan-alpine transnational level, and despite the fact that the national level is not important in defining the statutes and missions of these networks, it remains an issue that gives rise to lively discussion. Although, for the Alpine Convention, the state structure is imposed, given that it is an international treaty, the networks could have chosen a method of operation without state interference. However, almost certainly for reasons of efficiency, the organisational structure of the networks is strongly influenced

---

33 • Interview of 14.06.07 with a mayor of a member commune of the AdA (translated from original German by author)
34 • Interview of 12.10.08 in Slovenia.

by national considerations: the distribution of seats on decision-making authorities is made according to this method. It could also be pointed out that Switzerland and Austria have set up national sections within the AdA. This structure has enabled these countries to benefit from funding provided by their state governments in addition to the subscriptions of members[35]. However, although the autonomy of the networks does not seem under threat, certain choices are subjected to pressure from the services providing the funding. In Switzerland, the Federal Office for regional development (Office fédéral du développement territorial) has promised increased subsidies on condition that the number of network members increases[36]. As we have seen, however, not everyone agrees that membership needs to be increased.

At a more political and ideological level, policies promoting national interests sometimes take precedence over international considerations. Voting decisions during assemblies are sometimes based on partisan interests, defending national privileges. This irritates certain participants who point out that the interests of the Alps go beyond petty politics[37]. It may therefore be noted that, despite the willingness to focus on more horizontal relations, the administrative, political and ideological structures of the networks and their members are not able to completely detach themselves from the national level, even if this does not play an essential role in carrying out the projects of these same networks.

Finally the question may be asked as to whether the actors involved in these networks take the discussion on alpine borders even further and envisage the creation of a "sovereign alpine state" detached from the current institutional borders. According to information gathered during interviews, some see this as a possible scenario but, as they themselves admit, they are a small minority.

The constitution of an alpine state is, for the moment, no more than a dream, a utopian idea: "*The ideal situation would be to have a macro-region in Europe that is self-determining; we'll never get that, but… Officially [this argument cannot be expressed], but in terms of the natural environment it's already like that, [the Alps are] a biogeographical region, but not a geopolitical region; on the contrary, the Alps in the past were more united than they are today, for the borders of the states have taken power away from them. […] My dream is to see the Alps as a great alpine state, but it's clear that we'll never manage that*"[38]. In response to the question "Is it only your dream or is it also

35 • According to M. Siegele, the creation of national agencies now provides increased financing for the AdA. In the future, he thinks that this national level may enable an increase in political power (Personal notes, interview with C. Del Biaggio and B. Debarbieux, Mäder, 11.06.07).

36 • During the General Assembly of the Swiss AdA, it was mentioned that the Office Fédéral du Développement Territorial (Federal Office for Regional Development) is ready to invest more money on condition that the Swiss AdA finds new members (personal notes of 15.06.07).

37 • Sentiments expressed by two park representatives with whom I talked after a "sensitive" vote at the last General Assembly of Alparc (personal notes of 10.10.08)

38 • Interview with an official of the Alpine Convention (translated from original Italian by author, Bled, 11.10.08).

the dream of others you know?", the same person replied : "*Not enough, […] since it's clearly a utopian idea. It's utopian because […] today the state model dominates*". The majority of the people involved in this project, including those I have qualified as a "minority", would support the less revolutionary idea that "an alpine state is not necessarily an objective envisaged"[39].

Conclusion

In the introduction, the texts of different authors cited suggested the importance of social relations, and particularly trans-border relations, in the construction of a region. Thus "*mountain regions […] are not static entities or attributes, but social constructions that emerge from interaction among social actors*" (Balsiger, 2006:37). As we have seen from the study of two networks, the relations between actors are very strong and are active in consolidating the social links with a configuration that goes beyond neighbourhood relationships. Thus, the Alps, apart from having a particular type of fauna and flora, are also made up of men and women who *live* the Alps and who, in the case of a certain minority, carry out projects, sometimes innovative, based on cross-border cooperation. If, as we have seen, the idea of creating a supranational alpine institution outside of any interstate processes does not seem to be the objective of any of the actors involved, interviewees did not hesitate to assert that the alpine region truly exists as a "space for action". The different actors meet and work together on projects that, beyond the different words and ways of doing things, are driven by a "*strong alpine unity*"[40], founded mainly on the sharing of experiences. Here, we can see the relevance of Joe Painter's comments, observing that regions are both resources *for* human action and the *result of* such action (Painter, 2008: 343). The alpine actors work together for sustainable development in the Alps and at the same time build institutions that constitute the result of this work, or "*meaningful socio-political spaces*" (Paasi, 2002: 138).
The pan-European networks analysed in this paper illustrate an institutionalization of the links between different social actors, dedicated not only to action, namely in the form of projects, but also to the construction of new areas of governance, thus contributing to the creation of a European map where the frontiers of action are, in the words of McNeill, "fluid" (McNeill, 2004: 89).

Translation: Brian Keogh

---

39 • Interview with a member of Alparc (Bled, 12.10.08).
40 • Interview with former trainee of member region of AdA (25.06.07, (translated from original Italian by author). This person had organised an evening event open to the public to attract new members to the AdA.

Figure 1: Postcard produced by Alparc, © Alparc 2008

References

ALPARC, 2004. – *Réseau écologique transfrontalier*. Etude sur mandat de la Convention Alpine : « Espaces protégés transfrontaliers et réseau écologique dans les Alpes ».

BALSIGER J., 2006. – "Regional identity and resources policy effectiveness: Sustainable mountain development in the Swiss Alps and California's Sierra Nevada". Paper presented at the 2006 Berlin Conference on the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change. November, online : web.fu-berlin.de/ffu/akumwelt/bc2006/papers/Balsiger-RegionalIdentity.pdf (consulté le 06.04.09 et cite avec l'autorisation de l'auteur).

BALSIGER J., 2007. – "Regionalism reconsidered: The Alpine Convention as a model of earth system governance". Paper presented at the 2007 Amsterdam Conference on the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change, 24-26.05.07, online: www.2007amsterdamconference.org/Downloads/P-AC2007_Balsiger.pdf (consulté le 06.04.09 et cité avec l'autorisation de l'auteur).

DOBRAVEC J., KRŽE G., MENEGALIJA T., MORANDI V. C., SANTI S., COTI I., 2006. – « PALPIS. Un progetto per decidere insieme il futuro del nostro territorio ». *Palpis News*, n°1, online : www.palpis.org/documenti/palpisnews1.pdf (consulté le 21.10.08).

GILBERT A., 1988. – "The new regional geography in English and French-speaking countries". *Progress in human geography*, 12, pp. 208-228.

MCNEILL D., 2004. – *New Europe: imagined spaces*. London, Hodder Arnold, 206 p.

PAASI A., 2002. – "Bounded spaces in the mobile world: deconstructing 'regional identity'". *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, Vol. 93, n°2, pp. 137-148.

PAINTER J., 2008. – "Cartographic anxiety and the search for regionality". *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 40, pp. 342-361.

PRICE M., 1999. – "Towards co-operation across mountain frontiers: the Alpine convention". *European Environment*, 9, pp. 83-89.

PUDUP M. B., 1988. – "Arguments within regional geography". *Progress in Human Geography*, 12, pp. 369-390.

SANTI S., 2007. – « Programmi Europei ». *Notiziario del Parco Prealpi Giulie*, online : www.parcoprealpigiulie.org/notiziario/24_Aprile_2007.pdf (consulté le 21.10.08).

Internet sites:

www.alpconv.org/theconvention/conv03_fr.htm (consulted 06.04.09)
Report on state of ratification of Alpine Convention and its protocols
www.alpenallianz.org/fr/service-dinformation/telecharger (consulted 15.10.09)
Possibility of downloading summary of intermediate results of study on AdA: "Pan-alpine networks: the case of Alliance in the Alps"
www.alparc.org/presentation (consulted 22.10.08)
www.alpenallianz.org/fr/sur-alliance-dans-les-alpes (consulted 15.10.08)
Web sites with presentation of the two networks, Alparc and AdA
http://fr.alparc.org/nos-actions/an-ecological-network-in-the-alps (consulted 06.04.09)
www.cipra.org/fr/alpmedia/nouveautes/3024 (consulted 06.04.09)
Presentation of project "transalpine ecological network"
www.palpis.org (consulted 21.10.08)
Presentation of European project "Palpis".