

A missing link in the cultural evolution of the European Union:
Confronting EU ideology with INTERREGIII practice concerning cultural diversity

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Introduction

Cultural variety is seen as an important characteristic of Europe. The enlargement of the European Union (EU), globalization, the decentralization of the policy process, and the responses within local communities have combined to increase the multicultural character of many countries, adding to the number of languages, religions, ethnic and cultural backgrounds present in regions and cities. Recently, the EU has put more emphasis on a regional approach in its policies, with the aim of bringing Europe closer to its citizens. The European Commission (EC) became aware of the importance of the regional and cultural dimension of European integration for bridging the gap between integration policy, enlargement, and the citizens themselves (Barnett 2001). In this respect, Europe is advocating regional cultural variety as a resource in a pluralist policy approach (Coultrap 1999). “Unity in diversity” is the appropriated slogan, aiming to bring out the common aspects of Europe’s heritage, while respecting cultural, national and regional diversity.

Early ideas of promoting the regional level led to the INTERREG Community Initiative in 1990. This is an EU-funded programme framework that helps Europe’s regions to

form partnerships to work together on common projects. INTERREG is designed to strengthen economic and social cohesion throughout the EU, by fostering the balanced development of the continent through cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation. The INTERREG Community Initiative intends to prepare border areas for a Community without internal frontiers. In practice however, new cultural dynamics arise when borders are softened.

Confronting EU policy and ideology and INTERREG practice raises questions like “Is the EU really respecting and supporting the cultural diversity of its constituting regions and are the regions recognizing the grounding cultural aspects of their planning practice?”

This was the context within which the INTERACT project CULTPLAN was initiated. The CULTPLAN partnership recognized a need for in-depth study of culture and cultural variety in the INTERREG practice of regional planning and development. CULTPLAN focused on exploring the manifestation and mechanisms of culture within INTERREG projects. By collecting narratives how culture affected cooperation and planning practice in projects, the partnership also collected the various field understandings of “culture” itself. In this chapter we confront the understanding in practice with the concepts of culture in EU policy. In order to do so, our own understanding of culture has to be encompassing and therefore combines value system oriented, semiotic, strategic and participative conceptions of culture. By definition: culture is the community specific way that thinking and acting are influencing one

another. We will use the empirical results of the CULTPLAN research (During and van Dam 2007) to confront the EU ideology and policy on culture with the INTERREG practice, and analyse how culture is embedded in policy and practice. It will be shown that, in practice, the desired synergy between cultural diversity and social and economic development is – to some extent – a fairy tale.

Culture and cultural diversity in EU ideology and policy

From economic cooperation to cultural integration

The period of EU history that runs from 1990 to 1999 is known as the EU without frontiers. A single market economy, agreed upon in the Single European Act (SEA) in 1987, was supposed to emerge in this period. The goal of this SEA was to remove remaining barriers between countries, and to increase harmonization, thus increasing the competitiveness of European countries. Because of the collapse of communism across central and Eastern Europe, which began in Poland and Hungary, and is symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the European nations became closer to one another. In the preceding period, a low response to the elections of the European Parliament in the 80s has widely been interpreted as a ‘democratic deficit’ in the EU, caused by a lack of coordination and agreement, the dominance of national over supranational politics, and the marginal position of the European Parliament (Coultrap 1999; Decker 2002; Meadowcroft 2002). Reducing this deficit has been the target of many EU policies in this period. In response, the member states wished to supplement the progress achieved by the SEA with other reforms. As a result, the Treaty on European Union was signed

in February 1992 and entered into force in November 1993. This Treaty, also known as the Maastricht Treaty, changed the name of the “European Economic Community” into "the European Community", indicating a scope wider than economic growth (European Union 1992).

The Maastricht Treaty introduced the concept of European Citizenship, reflecting the shared values on which the European Unification is based. Presenting European Citizenship as a supplement to national citizenship, the ‘European cultural model’ accepts both cultural diversity and the defining of a shared cultural entity. In applying the concept of European citizenship, the aim of the EU’s cultural policy is to bring out the common aspects of Europe’s heritage, while respecting cultural, national and regional diversity (European Commission 2002a).

As a result of the Maastricht Treaty, the EU is authorized to undertake actions aiming at preserving, spreading and developing cultural values in Europe. The culture chapter of the Treaty says: ‘The community shall take cultural aspects into account in its action under other provisions of this Treaty, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures’ (European Union 1992; Treaty of Maastricht; art. 151:4). Initially its role was limited to enhancing the coordination between cultural actors from the different countries, or supplementing their activities in order to contribute to the growth of the cultures of the participating countries. By focussing on the societal infrastructures involved in the production of cultural events, the conception of culture was limited to “high-brow culture”. New cultural programmes (Kaleidoscope, Ariane

and Raphael) were installed directly after 1992, but were eventually evaluated as being too much based on a concept of culture that addressed the higher echelons of society and ignored the cultural aspects of daily life of ordinary citizens. The Commission recognized that, also as a result of the Schengen Convention ensuring citizens as free to travel all over Europe, a more intensive interaction between the daily life cultures present within the EU has emerged. Eventually, the cultural policy of the EU has been seen as an integrated part of the other policy areas and the conception of culture has broadened to the diversity of societal cultures. And this is relevant for discussing the relations between cultural diversity and economic development.

The Commission tried to develop an adequate definition of culture, but didn't succeed (Barnett 2001). As a result, different conceptions of culture were introduced during this period. In opposition to the already existing semiotic concept of culture promoting a European flag, anthem and other identifiers (Shore 1996), the Commission advocated a communal view of culture that acknowledged the daily aspects of the society as a whole. In this view, culture should be recognized and addressed in the context of the social economic development of regions, and thus become relevant for all citizens. If prosperity flourishes due to European projects, citizens are assumed to adopt a European identity, and a synergetic social-economic and cultural development is proclaimed. Another tendency in the cultural debate was to conceptualize culture in terms of participation. Citizens are assumed to become Europeans because of participation in activities resulting from their own culture and organized in EU-funded projects. The Committee of the Regions, installed in 1994 with the task of advising the Commission in the areas of economic and social cohesion, trans-European infrastructure

networks, health, education and culture, is in favour of the participative concept of culture (Barnett 2001). Clearly, all three conceptions are relevant and valid for establishing a European integration that addresses all regions and citizens.

As a result of the accession of eight new member states in May 2004 and the introduction of the Euro, the focus on culture became even stronger in the period of expansion, from 2000 to the present. These trends led to a higher level of cultural interaction between regions and countries. The cultural challenge posed by a bigger Europe that is playing an innovative economic role in the world has been proclaimed by the EU and is reflected by the European Commission's policy statement on the role of culture in a globalizing world (Brussels, 10 May 2007). This statement outlines the current European strategy for the synergy of economic growth and intercultural understanding. It affirms the central role of culture in the process of European integration and proposes a cultural agenda for Europe, and for its relations with third countries. The policy statement presents three major objectives that together form a cultural strategy for the European Institutions, the Member States, and the cultural and creative sector:

1. Promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue;
2. Promotion of culture as a catalyst for creativity in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy;
3. Promotion of culture as a vital element in the Union's international relations.

This strategy confirms what was already put into practice after the Treaty of Maastricht: a policy of integrating the cultural dimension with social and economic development. INTERREG can be seen as a vehicle of this strategy of the Commission's, executed at regional level. INTERREG among others addressed the cultural aspects of the cohesion policy and a better understanding of cross-border, transnational and interregional cultures was considered vital for successful cooperation. As argued above, three conceptions of culture are espoused by different actors and therefore play a role in INTERREG. These are: a semiotic conception of culture emphasizing European signifiers such as an EU flag in an attempt to establish a firm European identity among all citizens; a communal conception leading to synergy and integration of social-economic and cultural development of regional communities; and a participative conception emphasizing the inclusion and participation of citizens in EU-funded projects. All three conceptions are valid and may endorse one another, because none of them can establish "unity in diversity" on their own.

EU culture policy and INTERREG

In order to find an appropriate balance between enhancing economic development and respecting cultural diversity in the EU's regional policy, an awareness of cultural dynamics is needed in all EU policies. The Commission intends to ensure that the promotion of culture and cultural diversity is given due consideration whenever culture is at stake in regulatory and financial decisions or proposals, whether directly or indirectly. For example, the structural funds are presented on the European Cultural Internet Portal as an initiative with a specific cultural relevance (see http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/doc405_en.htm). This relevance

seems to be based on the assumption that the structural funds, and the INTERREG projects they are used for, have a significant impact on regional communities. This would require a participative planning process, a high level of publicity, and public awareness of the projects, or even involvement in running them. The projects are perceived as a vehicle for the diffusion of the EU conceptions of culture delineated above.

It is interesting to look at culture from the perspective of the regional policy. Is INTERREG¹ aware of the fact that it creates cultural dynamics between regions? And is INTERREG aware of the supposed role of these dynamics in European cohesion? The answer seems to be a decisive 'no'. There is a striking absence of cultural awareness in official publications describing the Regional Policy, such as Working for the Regions (European Commission 2001), and in the description of the INTERREG

¹ The INTERREG Community Initiative, which was adopted in 1990, was intended to prepare border areas for a Community without internal frontiers. It is financed under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). INTERREG aims at economic and social cohesion, a balanced and sustainable development of the European territory and territorial integration with candidate and other neighbouring countries. Special emphasis has been placed on integrating remote regions and those which share external borders with the candidate countries. INTERREG III is divided into three strands: A, B and C. Within the strands is a programme structure. The strands aim at improving the cooperation structures, leading to more and higher quality joint projects, and creating synergy between the exchange of best practices and the work in the mainstream structural funds programmes. Strand A aims at local development of social facilities, economy and environment in cross-border cooperation, strand B aims at spatial development strategies, linking cities and management of resources in transnational cooperation and strand C aims at the development of networks and joint structures in interregional cooperation.

initiative (European Commission 2002b). Even in the second progress report on economic and social cohesion (European Commission 2003), a broad view on the cultural aspects of cohesion is lacking and the main focus is on the need for simpler procedures and the inappropriateness of the “one-size-fits-all” management approach. The regional policy is dedicated to economic growth. At the level of themes for projects, cultural identity is being addressed, but mainly as leverage for achieving more economic growth.

So INTERREG is seen as an instrument of EU cultural policy, or at least as relevant to it, only INTERREG doesn't seem to be fully aware of this. INTERREG opts for enhancement of economic development at INTERREG policy level, without embedding culture. For the analysis of interregional cooperation and culture, this is important because it means that cultural dynamics resulting from INTERREG should be seen as unintentional coincidences without a grounding policy framework.

Culture and cultural diversity in INTERREG practice

Culture as a determinant in INTERREG evaluations

The relevance of culture in INTERREG can be illustrated by discussions of the evaluation and capitalization of its programmes. In the formal evaluation of INTERREGII that ran from 1996 to 2003, a major role was assigned to the culture of cross-border collaboration (LRDP LTD 2003). The evaluation states that there is

undoubtedly an overarching issue of an insufficiently developed trans-European cooperation culture between public authorities, institutions, citizens and businesses. Both this and other documents (Castelfranchi 2001; Inforegio 2005) show that in the practice of transnational, cross-border and interregional cooperation, cultural variety is often perceived as problematic. INTERREG evaluations lack indicators for assessing cooperation processes in general or cultures in particular. Despite an obvious lack of information, culture is mentioned as an important factor. Unfortunately, due to this information gap, we find very few ideas on how culture actually manifests itself. There is no discernible progress in understanding the role of culture, as culture and cultural differences are still mentioned in the Mid-term evaluation of INTERREG III (INTERACT 2005) as an important factor in the way programmes are being executed. The evaluation states that administrative cultures may differ considerably, and should be taken into account when judging the performance of programmes. This is a rather cautious description of the role of culture, when we consider the fact that many programmes started late or not at all because of a lack of understanding and shared values (INTERACT 2005).

INTERREG projects addressing culture

A substantial number of projects aim directly at cultural exchange, or use the cultural assets of a region as leverage for economic growth. In the classification of INTERREG projects in an incomplete project database (INTERACT 2007), these projects are categorized under culture (no definition given, but connected to the Lisbon Agenda) and under regional identity and attractiveness. Many of them are executed within the framework of the C strand, aiming at cultural exchange in networks. This is happening

despite the fact that culture is not mentioned as a topic of interest in the official description of the C strand (European Union 2004). In the C strand, the category of regional innovative projects, involving regional identity and sustainable development, seems to be the only gateway to establishing projects of cultural relevance. The great majority of projects in the cultural category belong to the B strand. This strand is more focused on planning systems and implementation, with an emphasis on regional identity. Regional identity is the classic theme that deals with the tension between Europeanization and maintaining regional cultural characteristics. The A strand is focused on softening the internal borders of the EU, between regions. This strand is being executed at a local level and only very limited information is available on central INTERREG websites. Projects in the A-strand are close to the public and focussed on sharing public infrastructures, including cultural ones.

Despite the incompleteness of the database, the reason for this difference may be found at the programme level, as the C strand is pan-European and the B strand is more decentralized. Culture and cultural heritage is explicitly addressed in all thirteen INTERREG IIIB programmes, each with their own internal structure. It seems that this decentralized decision making leads to more culture oriented projects in the B strand. A similar comparison between the B strand and the A strand would probably show the same tendency: the more decentralized the formulation and execution of a programme are, the more culturally diverse it will be. To substantiate this statement would require an overview of all projects more complete than is provided by the existing database, particularly for the A strand. Nevertheless, the projects in this database clearly show that the regions are interested in projects addressing culture.

Culture within INTERREG projects

Ideally, in terms of the three conceptions of culture given above, to contribute to the cultural aspects of Europeanization, projects should strengthen regional identity, combining social-economic and cultural development, or open up new ways of participation in developing its culture for the regional civil society. Simultaneously, signification of project results should contribute to a culture of European citizenship. This would require a thorough understanding of the roles and manifestations of the different cultures at stake in the partnership, and of their context. Practice shows how very difficult it is to understand the cultural differences within a partnership, and this has consequences for the regional exposure and implementation. Besides, practice shows that INTERREG actors also use a limited and rather diffuse conception of culture, focussed on strategy, planning and decision making. This will be illustrated by using a few examples from the CULTPLAN² study (During and van Dam 2007).

² In CULTPLAN, 20 INTERREG projects are culturally analysed. Projects have been selected from strands A, B and C and the project partnerships cover nearly all European countries. In addition to case study analysis, a questionnaire has been sent out to INTERREG officers and practitioners. For further information on methodology and results, see www.cultplan.org. One of the key problems in studying culture in practice is the intangibility of culture as a phenomenon. Some features are attributed to culture because they belong to a specific community or part of the world and not to others. In CULTPLAN this problem has been dealt with by investigating what participants perceive as culture in their project, and in addition asking about the social or daily practice of cooperation and reanalyzing the statements using a broad anthropological conception of culture (Gullestrup 2007). It has been observed that cross-cultural cooperation leads to a better understanding of one's own cultural peculiarities.

When starting a new cooperation, a partner often tries to explain the significance of the project for himself, his institute and his region. Practice shows that it is too easily assumed that the signals of significance are recognized and understood. The start-up meeting in one of the cases was organized in the room where the Treaty of Maastricht had been signed. This signification was not recognized by all partners, because it was not mentioned. When organizing meetings or excursions, partners do their utmost to show the importance their region attaches to the project. Only rarely is this recognized by the partners, and often it is seen as boring and time-consuming. Semiotic differences and the time it takes to get acquainted with cultural signals are very much underestimated in cooperation processes.

Differences in mandates frequently cause misunderstandings in a partnership, for example when taking decisions about budgets and measures to achieve goals. In a project dealing with monuments and cultural heritage, one partner has an extremely limited financial mandate and an almost total freedom to determine the measures to be taken to open up a fortification site to the public. In the same project, another partner in exactly the same hierarchical position has a much bigger financial mandate, but only a small role in the negotiation process about the construction of the public site. Because of the small distance and intensive contact between them, they cope with their different points of reference. But uncomfortable situations often arise with other partners in the projects.

Difficulties in understanding the variety of working cultures are illustrated by a project on flooding in which many partners contribute to the process of knowledge exchange in a network. In this project, the degree of cultural understanding directly influences choices about work packages made by the lead partner. The lead partner has a pronounced preference for quick email responses and these are interpreted as dedication and commitment. Another partner in this project does not distinguish between an email and a letter, and will only send emails that are checked at superior and ministerial level. Of course, this takes some time. And it was perceived as a lack of commitment by the lead partner. Moreover, there seems to be no obvious mechanism in the project for achieving a higher level of cross-cultural understanding. On the contrary, cooperation with the partner who responds faster has intensified.

The concept of cooperation is itself subject to different cultural interpretations. In cooperating, southern actors value interaction more highly than writing planning documents. Documents by western partners often are perceived as a signal of unwillingness to debate their contents. Western actors, on the other hand, perceive partners who do not prepare documents in advance as uncommitted. The way the ideas of cooperation in INTERREG have been translated into regulations and formats is not always recognized as appropriate by participants. A poor Italian region which is active in the CADSES programme said that some regions have money and no problems; others have no money and a lot of problems. Western European partners consider it important that there is give and take in a partnership: They object to partners who just 'consume'. There is a tension between the policy aims of INTERREG and the expectations of cooperating partners in practice. The regulative framework of INTERREG supposes

consensus about the project aims and the use of project resources within the partnership:
A consensus that can only rarely be found at the beginning of a cooperation.

These examples show the complexity involved in understanding cultural peculiarities and the cultural contexts of partners, and in the practice and understanding of working interactively. Understanding the differences takes time and requires flexibility. Specific problems in this respect are the triangular relationships of trust (Castelfranchi 2001) between INTERREG, lead partners and other partners, and the perceived inflexibility to deviate from the approved project application. The level of detail in the project application is very high, and it determines many aspects of project organization and implementation. The cultural issues which have been neglected in the preparation phase crop up during the execution of the project. An adequate handling of the cultural differences would require flexibility in respect to the detailed aims, deliverables, and actions mentioned in the project description. But accountancy controls are a major drawback for flexibility. Project managers are very reluctant to deviate from an approved project application, because they fear getting into trouble with the management and the funding authorities. Trust therefore has to be built in a partnership in a regulative context that is based on mistrust.

Despite the way INTERREG enforces detail and consensus, in the practice of cooperation, projects develop their own project cultures. The first sign of a project culture is the use of predefined concepts which reflect a particular worldview or view on European resources or regulations. Informal contacts outside official meetings may

confirm the presence of a specific project culture. Sometimes participants visit each other on their own initiative. The strongest project culture observed has been established by a group of participants who share an ideology about the use of space and aim to systematically convert the world with it. They are aiming at a disciplinary paradigm shift in planning for intensive space use. When a project team migrates from one project to another, often crossing the thresholds between INTERREG programme periods, this is usually based on a strong and positive project culture.

Many projects end up with a strong project culture in which participants tend to see each other as one big family. It can be observed that this takes place in many networking projects, based on weak or moderate interaction with regard to contents. On the other hand, just as many projects are closed having made good progress on their cognitive project aims, but little progress on the recognition and handling of cultural variety. This tends to happen in cognitive oriented projects aiming at the implementation of regional strategies using codified knowledge. In these projects, the interaction concerns the competition between (often unrecognized) culturally embedded practices. The two categories are rarely combined in one project. Immature project cultures may lead to either cognitive or social closure of partnerships, because partners are not fully acquainted with each other's cultures, causing the focus to lie on the partnership itself. And this has consequences for the implementation process, as will be shown below.

Implementing INTERREG projects in a regional culture

Implementing project results means that the outcome has to be confronted with the region's societal and political culture. The local community's attitude towards the EU plays an important role in this, but so do institutional cultures. In a cross-border project aiming at preventing social exclusion, the local political culture has influenced the project right from the start. The project had been prepared thoroughly in a network of more than two hundred institutions. From this network, five institutions were selected to start and carry out the project. The others were considered to provide a relevant network. However, local politicians considered four of the partners to be too radical and too committed, and replaced them with institutions with a much lower level of commitment. These newcomers had not been involved in the preparation at all. Subsequently, in selecting the day-to-day participants, no terms of reference were used for a shared language. This reflects a low level of commitment among the new institutes. The upshot was that the project was put on ice.

Another interesting example is a project on space use which uses the instrument of "implementation labs". The project leader visits the location, and sometimes the local mayor, prior to the event, in search of the right terms with which to address the local politicians. The implementation lab itself goes on for two or three days and a very strong commitment to solving the problem arises during this intensive short period. In some cases, solutions are taken seriously in the local context and culture; in others they are not. Or, as the project leader has been told by a local politician: 'Some ideas are very interesting and will be implemented right away, and some ideas are simply very interesting'. In some cases, these labs have proved to be a strong implementation vehicle.

Another positive example of shared semiotics is that of blood exchange between areas on two sides of a national border in a situation characterized by disrespect and stereotyping. The project resulted in a lot of press attention and eventually to reframing of the border and of the communities. This is one of the very few examples in which a strong local cultural effect can be identified as the spin off of an INTERREG project.

When surveying implementation practices, one can see that politicians are interested in concrete results that can be implemented straightaway, and do not perceive the interaction between partners of a project as a result in itself. Within the projects studied in CULTPLAN, no exchange of implementation experiences and strategies is organized, because this activity is not scheduled in a project application. Consequently, projects end at the formal deadline for permitted expenditures.

Practice shows that implementation of project results is severely hampered by the time-consuming process of understanding the cultural variety in a partnership. In most cases, the cultural differences have been perceived as problematic for achieving consensus about the project aims and the cooperation processes. The very idea of perceiving cultural differences as a resource – although sometimes mentioned – was hardly ever put into practice.

Conclusions: are INTERREG projects contributing to the cultural evolution of the EU?

In the course of the European integration process, culture has increasingly been recognized as a critical factor in public opinion and involvement. It became apparent that Europe should not only become a single market, but should also strive to create a united European citizenship with a diversity of regional cultures. The Treaty of Maastricht has put the European Commission in the position to develop cultural policies and strategies to substantiate this ideology, with certain restrictions. The Commission has chosen not to develop a strong stand-alone cultural policy based on a precise definition of culture, but to improve cultural relevance and awareness in other policy fields. In this respect, the desired synergy between social and economic development and strengthening cultural identity at the regional level has become important. And in view of the cultural policy of the Community, initiatives like INTERREG function as a vehicle to achieve this synergy.

In the regional policy documents concerning social and economic development, there is no sign of recognition of this idea of synergy. This is most remarkable in view of the interest of the Committee of the Regions in a pluralist and participative cultural approach. As a result of this cultural blind spot, culture and cultural diversity are conceived as problematic by-products of interregional cooperation in INTERREG evaluations. Due to a lack of cultural awareness and intelligence, no progress seems to have been made in the subsequent generations of INTERREG programmes.

In regional practice, actors are definitely interested in promoting their local or regional culture and using it to create leverage for economic growth, as can be shown by the focus of many projects. But in the execution of projects, cultural differences create very great obstacles to achieving their aims and contributing to the Europeanization process.

The lack of interest at the level of regional and INTERREG policy plays a significant role in INTERREG practice, because the regulative framework does not allow the flexibility that is needed for a time-consuming process of cross-cultural understanding. The presupposition of consensus on project description and the high level of detail required in a project application cause wicked cultural dilemmas, as illustrated in this chapter with a few of the many examples that have been described in the CULTPLAN project.

Underestimating the role of cross-cultural cooperation between regional actors in partnerships prevents the projects from becoming relevant for regional communities in the phase of exposure or implementation. Partnerships tend to focus on the internal processes of cognitive and cross-cultural progress. INTERREG and its projects therefore fail to contribute to the participative culture favoured by Europe and its regions.

This leads to the conclusion that the desired synergy between cultural diversity and social and economic development is a fairy tale, and will remain so as long as regional policy does not acknowledge the vital and pluralistic role of culture. European regional policy has not yet adopted the three conceptions of culture in a new regulative framework, supporting Europeanization through participation, synergy and signification. Considering the ideology of “unity in diversity” and its cultural implications, and considering, too, the serious interest of regional actors in cultural development, there is clearly a missing link between EU ideology and EU and INTERREG practice.

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