

# Towards the “Playmaker region” model

## Defining the emergent traits of a new epistemic model for the strategic understanding of regions

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**Abstract** - *The article examines current paradigms for regional development and transition in EU, analyzing their generative frameworks in search for hegemonic strategic representations and alternative, locally emergent models. In order to define a possible pathway for sustainable innovation, a critical analysis of the epistemic paradigms that interpret territorial phenomenologies and produce strategic visions is necessary. The relation between EU spatial policies and Albania's 2030 national plan is used to highlight how dominant frameworks are used and applied in integration processes. In this operative context, the notion of Transition is tackled as an ambiguous term that needs, in order to be understood, to be put in a concrete historical and spatial perspective. The article explores emerging alternative models, using Albania, and the cross-boarder regional of the Ohrid lakes area as an “acid test” to highlight the fragility of current strategic paradigms and the emergent alternatives. In particular the notion of “Playmaker region” is formulated, as both a specific spatial & environmental condition - an emergent phenomena - and a potential model to think territorial transitions in EU. This model articulates discursively the different epistemic frameworks and proposes a new role for cross-boarder regions dominated by natural assets. The article defines some invariants and features that identify the “Playmaking” action in regional strategies and geo-political positionment.*

**Keywords** - playmaker region; epistemic model; emergent traits

### Introduction

This article contributes to broader research on Lakes Ohrid and Prespa, examining the hypothesis that achieving sustainable cross-border integration in regions dominated by natural resources requires a reimagining of the prevailing epistemic and operational frameworks. Specifically, it advocates for an update to the hegemonic paradigms underpinning current EU policies for spatial integration and territorial transition.

The article is structured in four parts :

**Part 1** offers a critical observation of the Inherited Paradigms through which we currently interpret spatial integration within the EU in cross-border regions.

**Part 2**, explores the multiple dimensions and problematic aspects of Transition policy.

**Part 3**, focuses on Albania as a test-terrain to evaluate operative consequences of current policies and frameworks of understanding in order to verify whether its cross-boarder territories can give hint to valuable epistemic alternatives.

**Part 4**, explores the notion of “Playmaker Region” and the guiding traits of this approach, as a counter-deduction inspired by the values and opportunities

brought by the analysis of the Ohrid lake case-study.

### Inherited Paradigms

In order to prepare our strategic gaze to imagine the future evolution of cross-boarder territories dominated by natural assets we should first of all analyse what's in the toolbox of planning, and verify if the instruments we have are adapted to new emergent challenges. Observing the evolution of planning in the last fifty years in EU we recognize a dominant thread of political and societal ambitions, epistemic paradigms and spatial strategies, that have deeply influenced national and communitarian (EU) spatial policies and still do.

### Linear growth & Competition

The big picture of territorial transformations illustrates the first feature of inherited paradigms, that is to say, the disciplinary primacy of economic sciences and more specifically of geographic economy, over other competencies and scientific domains of strategic thought such as Planning

or environmental studies. Over the years, this fundamental condition defined the filtering lenses through which to interpret existing spatial conditions and anticipate future orientations. The expectations of Linear, exponential growth dictated the line, bending territorial identities and vocations to the reductivism of economic models. The regional scale has progressively emerged as a space that would allow to manage and distribute growth in a uniform, coherent ensemble, allowing to shape each territory on the ideal model of perfect distribution and balance [2]. Within this framework, the diversification and specialization of the region's sub-areas aimed at controlling the distribution of specific attractor programs and to orient the fluxes of commuters and visitors along connective corridors of development [3]. Zooming out at the European scale, this model offered the illusion to insure inner balance and growth redistribution to each region, while enabling external competition among different regions. Unfortunately, the logic of economic competition for capital attractiveness, does not respect the ideal boundaries of geometric models and produces unbalance and fragilization in the very urban heart of central localisations.

### Functional reductivism

The epistemic foundation of this strategic approach to regional organization is defined as the Functionalist model, which organizes programmatic offers in a space conceived as "rationally structured" – a neutral support for economic action (Conti). As Joel de Rosnay points it out, this was the latest result of a long tradition of positivistic analytical theories of spatial economic organization based on a cognitive strategy that reduced factual reality to simple, discrete elements that could be analyzed separately from one another and from the whole they belonged to. This resulted in the structuration of knowledge into distinct disciplinary domains and, as a corollary, in mono-thematic sectorial policies for spatial organization.

### Polycentrism and the project of space

These ideal models are transformed into tangible spatial strategies through the adoption and dissemination of the Polycentric approach to regional organization. The raise of the Urban age,

with the collective focalization on metropolitan areas as growth machines that could produce a high percentage of GDP despite hosting a little minority of world population, resulted in wide spread diffusion of polycentric visions around EU. An archipelago of specialized centers would be connected by a dense grid of rail-transport systems, allowing for capitals and workers to fluently move from one attractor to the other. It is not astonishing, that in a strategic vision focused on the trajectory and localization choices of enterprises and capitals (financial, and human), key elements of regional spaces, such as environmental systems, living communities, landscape values, were reduced to reduced to the rank of background noise. Over the years, and starting with the ESPON inquiries on EU spatial condition of the 60s, Polycentrism has been at the core of very different spatial visions for EU and its trans-national dimension:

The **Megalopolis EU** was a first tentative, led by the CRONWE – an NGO of northern-Europe planners, that applied J. Gottman's ideas for an American megalopolis to the EU territory, essentially trying to cluster and connected the areas where urban density was higher, under a coordinated economic strategy.

The **Blue Banana scheme**, developed by the French Datar in '89, preparing for a vision of "united" Europe and in order to find a specific space for France and Paris. This vision represents an urban galaxy going from London to Milan, that binds together approximately 100 million people and serves as a symbol of connectivity and economic vitality across major European cities.

The **Polycentric N-O** is a vision contained in the EUROPE 200+ report by the European Commission. The study identified EU's economic engine within the "Central and Capital Cities" (CCC) of the northeastern European region (Zonneveld). This report represents, of course, the triumph of a polycentric approach.

Over the years, alternative visions have emerged alongside the focus on economic locomotives, trying to decline polycentrism over natural economic resources. These visions are rooted in the identification of remarkable territories for touristic economy purposes (The Mediterranean, the Alps, the Danube, the Baltic sea), and have been the

object of interreg programs (2,3,4) led by networks of city.

## A Plan for Europe?

The Visions we have mentioned, all influenced by the functionalist economic paradigm, where finally not implemented per-se as a Trans-national plan for EU. Though political and economic integration moved on through the years, spatial issues did not follow the same logic. The reasons for this is a prevailing logic in National systems, that reserves spatial design to the control of single states. The idea of a supranational plan—a spatializing vision—carries normative and restrictive implications, and delegating such power to supranational institutions raises concerns. Europe is also composed of very different urban cultures, legislative frameworks, and administrative tools for spatial design and governance. Harmonizing these diverse elements into a cohesive vision poses significant challenges. In other words, the quest for a trans-national European spatial project crossed complex political, cultural, and administrative settings.

Nevertheless, a strong system of ideas prevailed as the dominant frame of reference across borders: the idea of Polycentric organization of regions, the strategies for economic specialization and the consequent mobility structuration did influence national and trans-national policies. Even though we do not have a spatial planning vision for EU's future territories, we can definitely recognize a plan "à l'œuvre" if we observe the strategies for Trans-European Transport Networks (TENs). These networks intertwine public and private investments, shaping spatial connectivity today, and (tomorrow) stronger political integration. TENs combine mobility and logistics systems across the entire EU territory, flattening, standardizing (and controlling) access conditions for the flows of goods and people. The TEN plan, extends beyond the continent in the network of Mediterranean and Atlantic sea-highways, delivering the utopian image of a fluid continent, where geographical and political borders dissolve into liquid earth (AVALANCHE – TVK-KH STUDIO-AB). In this vision, physical space mimics the flattened and abstract features of the ideal functionalistic models for regional organization. The perfect image of a "Business plan Europe".

## An Hegemonic consensus

The paradigm we have described, constituted a long-lasting reference for regional spatial policies around Europe, becoming a reassuring and automatic go-to, not only for designers and public authorities that managed space design processes, but also for those actors (policy makers, financial institutes, insurance companies, development companies) that relied on the "consensus hegemony" of such paradigms to orient themselves when operating in the realm of spatial transformation processes and regional development. The effectiveness of this referential of ideas and tools, relies on two aspects:

On one side the epistemic nature of the referential, which, being derived from the realm of Economy theories, has profited of a positive confirmation bias in all those operative domains oriented towards capital accumulation and growth.

On the other side, the conceptual and visual aspect of the referential, built on easy-to-grasp geometric concepts of centrality, polarization, linear quantitative increase, gave to non-specialists, the candid sensation that urban phenomena could be easily understood and governed through a system of simple receipts. Complicated, and articulated steps, of course, but predictable, and manageable

after all... or a wishful illusion.

Through the years this culture of development became a template for collective action, and brought us to touch the limits of growth (D. Medows), unleashing a plethora of unexpected negative counter-effects that justify the current urge to find alternative approaches to regional organization and transformation.

## The challenges and opportunities of Transition-S

Today, the communicative effectiveness and the inertial energy of the inherited frameworks we have described confront with the pathways of Transition. What comes under the term Transition can be seen in two different ways: 1 - as a process dictated and governed by human societies towards a more sustainable tomorrow - a terrain for strategic confrontation of ideas on what future should look like; 2- as an environmental and societal revolution we are immersed in, with little hope to plan or anticipate our way through it. In both acceptions, the inherited protocols to plan and organize our relation with environment are challenged and proven fallacious. Both acceptions challenge current approaches to planning; it is worth exploring them in order to elaborate alternative pathways.

Transition as an unplanned revolution

Transition, if seen as a process of disruptive change we simply happen to be immersed in, comes as an urgent "last call" for Humanity to save it-self. It arrives in a moment in time, in which our planning capacity is challenged, not by the lack of advanced forecasting methods, but by the lack of meaningful, shared, long-term visions that could allow to orient the navigation of an era in which earth is shattered by interconnected, extreme revolutions. Spatial and environmental crisis are a Bio-political crisis. Climate change promises to alter the relation of men to its living environments in radical ways – to such a point that insurance companies, in 2024, already stopped covering sensitive geographical areas such as USA coast-lines. And all this while local human organizations are shattered by the incremental explosion of the global techno-financial domain boosted by artificial intelligence and its societal impact. Together, these forces herald a profound transformation in the fundamental dynamics of production, consumption, and distribution of goods on the planet, and question the attribution of meaning and social values of the old urban age. When it comes to Planning we can observe a series of consequences:

*In terms of Time dimensions.* These changes impose to think both in terms of urgency and of long-term impact, illustrating the failure of the long and slow process implied by policy making. Planning appears like an old-school, ineffective anticipatory instrument. It seems like by the act of Naming historical phase as "Transition" we hope to gain some control over its dynamic evolution. Transition will be about defining the tools to accompany transformations in real time, while setting control boundaries.

*In terms of political governance.* Authoritative institutions that in the past defined planning ambition horizons (nation-states, communities of states, regions) see their power to impact and govern the needed action decrease rapidly, if compared to Major cities (concentrating population and CO2 production), large multinational companies (shaping the world-wide flows of goods and information) or autonomous groups of citizens and bottom-up actors (free to incarnate a concrete political dimension that moves beyond the limits

of representatives democracy). Leaving these new emergent powers use the old toolbox of planning – shaped upon an economic functionalistic premise– risks to definitely alienate from the field of concrete planning issues such as : public/general interest, ecological balance, social justice, territorial instances.

## Transition as battlefield for alternative future-S

On the other side, Transition, if meant as a multi-generation strategic project for the transformation of the Human impact on earth's nature, is a complex notion, hard to reduce to simple figures, and demanding of cross-disciplinary and inter-policy perspectives to be defended and implemented. Ecological Transition is often understood as a conceptual umbrella, covering the various fields of the battle against the climatic, social and environmental consequences of decades of unleashed industrial and urban development. But what might appear as a consensual revolution is, in practical terms, a battle-field of opposing ideas and perspectives, as the decreasing consensus in COP world meetings seems to confirm.

Within the distant Horizon of Transition an arena is revealed, where radically distant futures confront. The delta-gap among different idea(l)s of future Transition spans from the Paradigm of de-growth and of a post economy society prepared for autonomization and secession from the urban (Marot, Faburel) to the hyper-liberism of company driven planning, preparing for a inter-planetary, digital transhuman age. Alternative narratives emerge and are championed by diverse interest groups within politics, civil society, and the cultural sphere. Curiously, each group seems fully empowered within its own echo chamber of consensus. However, this empowerment often transforms vision-making into a tool for promoting blind motivation rather than fostering inter-sectorial democratic consensus through open debate and constructive confrontation.

*In the planning realm, we observe the emergence of new needs :*

- The need of new approaches to Vision Making, capable to define societal meaning, and step-by step motivational strategies, in a post-planning perspective. Accompanying and expanding a missing democratic arena for confrontation upon spatial transformation topics.

- The need to define new paradigms for territorial transition in which alternative, emergent visions of the future can dialogue, going beyond the mould inherited from the 19th century economic theories models.

We have sketched a general panorama of alternative epistemic approaches to the term Transition and their implications for planning. It is also important to observe how this paradigm is mobilized by public institutions in official Policy making. This should allow us to understand the current evolution (and needs) of the strategic framework we are currently operating in as well as the role the project of space is playing. In order to conduct this observation we will move from the general EU context to the borders of neighbouring countries.

## Transition in EU – a fragmented frame of reference

In recent years, the European Union has deployed various policies to stimulate and govern transition. We can mention the European Green Deal, which aims to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050; the "Ready for 55%" package, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030; and

the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM)-economic fund and support and financing system-which is established to accompany the geographic areas and social spheres that will suffer most during the transition period. The main focus of EU's programs is the area of economic and productive policies, and despite references to founding texts such as the Burtland Report (1987) or the European Landscape Convention (2000), which assigned a key role to the project of space and of the environment in order to structure long lasting socio-cultural transformative visions, in current policies, the project of space appears to be relegated to an ancillary and supportive role to economic orientations. To get an approximative idea we can take as a reference ratio the budget of the "Investment for Jobs and Growth" (IJG) for 2021-2027, resulting in EUR 369 billion and that of "Next Generation EU" – 750 billions, and compare these with the financing of spatial planning related programs.

When examining European policies that reimagine the design of urban spaces and territories, we encounter a multifaceted and fragmented scenario. Without presumption of exhaustivity we can mention the framework and goals of some major programs :

**URBACT** processes focus on urban and territorial dynamics. Co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), they primarily serve as platforms for learning, experience exchange, and dissemination of best practices. Their overarching goal is to foster a common cross-cultural understanding among representations of cities and territories across different countries. While project proposals are not their primary aim, they contribute significantly to shaping urban discourse.

**UIA (Urban Innovative Actions)** active between 2014 and 2020, and **EUI (European Urban Initiative)** 2021-2027 support experimental transition-oriented projects and try to advance conceptual frameworks. Despite their limited budgets (UIA had a total of 372 million euros over 7 years), they prioritize specific actions and thematically themed policies, often with a techno-economic focus. These programs contribute to the evolution of urban practices and knowledge focusing on local experimnts.

**INTER-REG** projects emphasize best practices, but their scope extends to supporting specific policies. Additionally, they operate at the EU frontier, fostering collaboration and integration with new partner countries.

A deeper analysis of these EU's initiatives, the size of their financial budgets and the geographic distribution of its territorial experimentations shows us some critical feature:

1. In EU the Financial Priority is given to technological and productive transformations, reserving a restricted budget for territorial related innovation.

2. The level of technicality and complexity of Transition oriented policy tools makes it hard for ordinary municipalities to enter EU programs or even learn lessons from their results. Bridging the gap between representation and real-world implementation is crucial.

3. EU tools operate within a spatiall fragmented logic. They collect success-stories and disseminate them in the community of participants, though not transforming these in generalized policy proposals for fragilized territories. As such they produce wide-spread communication, and a shared culture among networks of experts, but find hard time translating into broad spatial transformations.

4. Transition, as it emerges from EU programs, is not oriented towards the definition of a cohesive spatial project for EU trans-national space



## Transition in EU – regional experimentations for Vision making

If EU programs do not deliver a Vision of the trans-national European space of the future, and rather focus on the valorisation of local success initiatives, it is by looking at another set of international initiatives that we might find some interesting elements of reflection. It is the case of Regional ateliers for vision-making such as : Atelier International du Grand Paris, Luxembourg in Transition, Rheinishes Revier, Lausitz Raumlabor, Greater Geneva.

For the moment these processes remain rare experimentations, that have hard time impacting real planning processes, still based on the corpus of references from past decades. Nevertheless, these initiatives, allowed to test new institutional processes, using creativity to boost inter-actorial dialogues and augment the long time-spans of planning activity with more agile, short-term, tools for strategic thinking and design. In these initiatives new spatial paradigms and methods are developed, around the notion of circularity and environmental neutrality of territorial transformations. The scale of these reflections, vast and territorial, can inspire a new approach to spatial project of regions across Europe.

### Albania, an “acid test” for planning

In order to better understand the impact of the paradigms that influenced EU's strategies for Spatial organization and integration in the last fifty ears, as well as current approaches to Transition, it appears useful to turn to current planning strategies in EU's candidate countries. Here the features of EU's Planning tradition, play the role of colonizing ideologies and appear clear on the map – in neat contrast with the organization of territories that in the past have evolved following different, endogenous, logics. At the same time, in distant territories, and under-considered areas, original ideas emerge, that allow to tackle Transition under unexpected perspectives. We will thus use the Albania case as an “acid test”. We will refer to Albania's National plan, as an exemplary application of functionalistic strategic organization and polycentrism, and to its cross-boarder natural areas (Ohrid lakes area) as test terrain for a new approach to strategic thinking and vision making.

### The paradox of the anvil and the hammer

EU candidate countries face a double challenge: on one side, they are asked to conform in political and economic terms to the levels of development of EU countries, which accelerates their growth processes while inevitably decreasing their control capacity in both economic and social terms; and on the other side they are also expected to invest in “Sustainability”, though not having yet the capacity to structure the necessary economic, administrative and social models. The combination of these two conditions prepares the terrain for a risky situation, since as it has always been in the history of planning (expecially in the mediterranean area), plans impact long before their physical enactment. The perspective of EU integration, pushes economic forces to take advantage of what becomes perceived as the last instants of old-fashioned urban laissez-faire before the arrival of a new regulatory monster. As a consequence, nations often struggle to simultaneously address the challenges of development and transition. They tend to tackle these two phases sequentially, compressing into a short period what took Europe 50 years: first develop, then cure.

If we observe the General National Spatial Plan

2030 - Shqipëria 2030 - we recognize EU's keywords and diagrams from the '90s (an explicit quote on Christaller's “Theory of central places” is even made in the method introduction chapter as a founding principle). The plan claims taking into account environmental goals but asses a localized and not systematized map of environmental and climate risks. What is called upon to build the national spatial vision is the armature of flows and infrastructural investments, associated with bubbles that represent a rather uniformized grid of interconnected urban polarizations.

The repertory of environmental values, of Natura 2000 or PON protected areas, of water valleys and river lines is of course rich and complete, but it does not constitute a leading system. The current Visions for the future of Albania relies on the same Doxa that informs the available spatial organization of future EU, and will likely face the same struggles :

*The economic logic* defines Urban polarization areas, bassins of growth and distribution , and dictates the frame of reference to all the subsequent, ancillary domains. The focus on economic growth as goal per-se risks to boost the automatisms of “construction-industry based planning”, consuming land and socio-cultural values at fast speed.

*The rapid infrastructuration and connection of “strong urban polarities”*, produces, by contrast, the emergence of new “unthought territories”: a diffused uncontrolled suburbia and, at distance, shrinking regions. Unbalanced development concentrates attention and resources where fluxes are concentrated and produces the progressive abandonment of new peripheral territories, where pollution and climatic effects strike harder, given the lack of control, maintenance and investments. The risk is that of reproducing, what happened in Italy in the '70s and '80s with the emergence of now called “aree interne”, i.e. areas with low access to basic educational and health services, in high risk of depopulation, making it hard to confront incipient climate challenges.

*The blueprint of tomorrow* – in the form of a grid of infrastructures connecting homologated development centres – thinks space as a perfect and simple machine to be completed in all its parts, which will then proceed autonomously granting the expected results. This conception does not take into consideration the variable of time : areas will mutate progressively, activating unpredictable reactions on the overall plan. With current tools we get an image of the future, but not a Kompass to move into action one step at a time.

### Learning from corss-boarder natural areas

Within the strategic map of polycentric Albania what might be more relevant for the scope of future Transition are the “inbetween blank spaces”. What in economic models is seen as “distances between key economic polarities” (quote). These are huge natural areas, that constitute the linear boundaries of the nation, towards the sea – on the west and towards neighbouring countries on the east, interconnected by linear ecosystemic chains, and assessing the fringes of a potential “Portal nation”, between the east and the west of the European continent.

In these white spaces, and more specifically, in cross-boarder territories dominated by natural assets, the usual economy-based receipts have hard time proving their effectiveness. The territories that historically challenged urban expansion expose the opportunities that lay beyond the “limits of/to growth” and expose the “limits of economic models” who defined these areas as “geometric distances” between meaningful

centers. The peripheral localization - cut aside from central urban poles, the lack of population critical mass, the absence of urban services and of infrastructures, the deconnection from major urban areas of neighbouring countries have prepared the ground for a territorial situation in which values and capitals are essentially nature based, where local communities have organized through cooperation rather than competition, "co-evolving with" rather than conquering local ecosystems. Areas such the Ohrid lakes, offer the opportunity to imagine Transition not as form of post-development repair, but as a new way to inhabit, care and prepare valuable natural reserves to evolve towards a higher environmental complexity and robustness.

## Towards the "Playmaker" Region

How can new regional models help leap-frog the toolkits inherited from the "old continent" ? First we need to change our gaze. Current strategies for regional spaces usually envision and sell territories as "Champions" of economic performance, as "strikers" (in sports jargon) - specialized in a specific branch of urban programming (production, tertiary, residential, tourism, etc). The culture of comparative benchmarks has long reflected this philosophy, colonizing distant territories with Central European keywords, hoping to locally implant "success-stories" built on quite different political, social and economic preconditions.

Cross-boarder, peripheral territories, dominated by natural assets force us to change our gaze on territorial development, suggesting new strategic approaches - new regional models. These are territories of diversity, of extreme specificity, not reducible to imported exogenous categories. They offer the opportunity for a game-changing approach to Transition - think the regional territory as a "Playmaker". In basketball, the "playmaker" is the person in charge of distributing playing opportunities to the different members of the team, of maintaining and coordinating a wide and long lasting strategic vision while also supporting to face unpredicted emergencies. The Playmaker uses lateral thinking and peripheral view to keep an eye on the complex dynamic of the game. Imagine the Regional space as a Playmaker implies a transition in values, strategic posture and spatial organizations. The "Playmaker region" is a region in which, starting from an inter-connected and unified systems of "cross-boundary environmental and urban protagonists", a common strategy for multiple nations is envisioned around the same geographical values. Developing this strategic vision means not only thinking about programming from the perspective

## Transitions of the "playmaker model"

*Epistème : From the functionalistic paradigm to the logic of complex systems*

The Playmaker region is a strategic concept that does not try to force the existing reality in the mould of a pre-defined geo-economic models, but originates from the specificity of local living systems, socio-cultural organizations and of co-evolution patterns among human communities and ecosystems. The Playmaker Region model detaches from the recipes inherited from the positivistic culture of mechanical functioning and automatic policy design. It rather expands the reflections of Territorial studies (Magnaghi, Corboz) and of System Theories applied to planning strategies. Using Acoff's terms, the Playmaker perspective should enable the passage from the age of Machines to the age of Systems.

In epistemic terms, as Sergio Conti synthesizes it - the Systemic approach identifies reality as

a whole in which the various phenomena are in mutual relationship. It proposes a combinatorial methodology, to organize knowledge and the object of knowledge itself, integrating the critical retroactive investigation of how phenomenon are observed. The systems approach may involve the notion of "bounded rationality", and thus the recognition that certain levels of complexity can only be partially grasped by human intelligence - it is the case of living systems and complex ecosystemic relations.

Under this new paradigm, the regional system emerges from the articulation of internal constituent relations and from the retroactive internal elaboration of external inputs. To the geometric immobility of traditional models, Playmaking opposes a time-sensitive Regional organization, holistically articulating key relations at multiple scales, among different sectorial domains. The visions for Bio-Regions proposed by the territorialist school of thought (A. Magnaghi) are integrated in the Playmaker concept. The Bio-regional features of local territories, are not seen as the foundation of a paradigm for an autonomous, "secessionist" alternative to existing urban sectors, but as broader connectors of existing urban regions within nature-based areas open to strategic experimentations. In a space-time perspective, we can imagine that when the scalar focus of territorial reading is widened, the bio-regions currently set on the outskirts of leading national systems, acquire a new connective position. They can thus take on new roles and contribute to reshaping the overall system. Bio-regions can structure a system of systems in which peripheries re-invent centres.

*Development: From competition and growth - to adaptivity and cooperation*

In the recent European history, territorial transformations have seen regions compete to attract capitals, enterprises and specialized populations (creatives, tourists, etc). This process resulted in the standardization of urban spaces and territorial identities. Similar recipes for success produced similar spaces around EU, resulting in fast-burning successes. When "city clients" move away from their specialized district: "commercial areas", the "creative districts", the "business quartier", the "touristic destinations" .... the fragile condition of urban values and spaces - reduced to market products- is exposed.

In the Playmaker region model, development, is no longer ment as expansive and quantitative growth, but rather, as in biological systems, as the progressive augmentation of systemic complexity and robustness, achieved through adaptation and cooperation. The aim is that of increasing the robustness of the region's internal and external definitory relations , and more specifically : - Local and territorial constitutive relations that define the Regional System's cohesion. - Supra-local and trans-territorial relations, defining the potential interaction of the regional system with other systems or external forces. This kind of development conceives the augmented autonomy and capacity of the Playmaker region as a potential asset for the performances of neighbouring territories.

*Economy : From financial capital to "capital earth"*

If ordinary metropolitan regions struggled during the 20th century to conquer and attract financial capitals in the playmaker region, the presence of ancestral ecosystems and embedded natural resources allows to move towards another kind of capital accounting - "earth's capital" (Stanziani). This Capital, like gold, is not meant to be consumed or

spent, but represents a safety reservoir, that allows human communities to pursue their experience on earth. It is constituted by a rich palette of components ranging from soil components, geological ingredients, natural habitats, living communities, water ecosystems and reserves. It also integrates the ecosystem services the local systems provide to wider territories.

The size of this capital can be assessed by evaluating which financial resources (on which time-spans) would be needed to reproduce on site the same ecosystemic complexity, and to deliver the same "ecosystemic services". What if we damaged local natural systems to promote business as usual growth? Which price shall we pay?

The financial price would be incommensurable – which explains clearly why natural values should be assessed as "non negotiable". This value/price will grow increasingly with climate change and environmental crisis since ecosystemic richness rarifies. Just as in the '90s -2000's "Global cities" became the heroes of the planetary urban age, similarly in the future, Global reservoirs of naturalness, such as the Ohrid Lake, can become the protagonists of a new chapter in the history of human relation to the world. Playmaker regions are built around the concept of preserving and enhancing these reservoirs of "capital earth".

#### *Boundaries : From inclosed regional structures to open, cross-boarder coherence operators*

The playmaker region is no longer thought as a bounded territory within which to find specialized areas, in concurrent juxtaposition with neighbouring territories. It is rather a system that connects and weaves distant territories across borders in a new whole, reaching far to establish new relation between a shared natural domain and the urban polarities that inhabit it. It is thus a tool for territories laying in different countries to grow "stronger together", rather than competing. A natural region connecting urban regions in a trans-national perspective.

The Playmaker Region articulates a local system with other territorial scales through the intermediation of actors or entities belonging simultaneously to the local network and a supra-local network, the region can thus be seen as an open system that connects elements strengthening overall coherence. This dynamic process, takes into consideration the dimension of time.

In the Ohrid Lake region each territory lives in a distinct historical time, a distinct age of socio-economic development, with the Macedonian sequence, dominated by semi-industrial agriculture, and an aggressive relationship to the lake plain that has led to pollution of the reservoir; the Greek sequence, now integrated to Europe and in the midst of developing an economy of protection and knowledge; the Albanian sequence, stuck in a condition of interrupted modernity. Coordinating the becoming of these three units in a reunited anthropogenic-environmental system means thinking each sequence in relation to its urban and naturalistic 'arrière pays' and at the same time, in coordination with its neighbours, distributing opportunities for investment and protection initiatives.

#### *Structure : From networks of urban centers - to inhabited connective ecosystems*

In the Playmaker region, Natural spaces constitute the founding structure. This allows to avoid thinking separately the space of humans and the space of natural ecosystems, but to rather weave them together as inhabited realms. The bi-dimensional

traditional schemes of interconnected urban polarities gain supplementary dimensions, by taking into account the environmental and the landscape infrastructure. In cross-border areas, environmental values and trans-national natural systems make it possible to recognize new territorial commons, and legible spatial relations on which to establish territorial strategies. In this models, Urban areas are not exclusively conceived in their mutual transport-related relation, but rather as parts of meaningful landscapes. As such, urban sequences can be recomposed and adapted in accordance with their Landscape sequence they belong to. This results in an opened and adaptable regional perimeter, capable to integrate and recompose with other vast natural areas.

In the case of the Ohrid Lakes we can imagine the aquatic core area, connecting to the "third lake" of neighbouring agricultural valleys in Albania or the mountain-chains of the Pelister National park on the Greek side. An open system and an interconnecting organization in which urban hubs of different size (such as Bitola or Corizza - among others) can find their place of exchange, contact and service sharing.

#### *Program : From parachuted economic specializations to social empowerment and meaning building*

In the Playmaker region, the systemic understanding of constituent elements suggests to think programming and economic specialization, not as the resultant of short-term capital extraction, but as a multi-dimensional choice, that should contribute to the strengthening of social, and environmental contextual durability. For instance, taking the Ohrid example, rather than imagining a reductionist "touristic specialization", which would essentially focus on the services to be provided in function of an ideal "client-visitor", resulting in the banalization of program offer and of spaces, in the Playmaker region the focus will be on local populations, social groups and environmental protection. Rather than applying ready-made formulas, this will imply to formulate strategic questions to identify the multiple virtues and conditions future economic activities should grant : Which kind of activity can be beneficial for both visitors and locals? With which perspectives for Knowledge economy? How can environmental considerations define, limit and precise the kind of service offer to be installed? Can new services be used in different ways, by different publics, during different seasons? How can the arrival of new population contribute to the care of local ecosystems? These are some of the premises to imagine a socially driven economic model, that might attract environmental-cultural sensitive publics, and institutional investment.

### **Conclusions – Towards next steps**

Our exploration of the paradigms for regional strategies in EU in the age of Transition has shown that Cross-boarder regions dominated by natural assets hold the potential to become a new reference for alternative territorial models. In particular the "Playmaker Region" proposal articulates strategic thinking moving from the oppositional dualism of - Polycentrism vs. Territorialism - towards a Systemic integration of the two. This strategic perspective opens the domain of spatial regional strategies to new paradigmatic influences of the Transition age, integrating ordinary multipolar urban regions with more autonomous ones, growth oriented territories, with bio- reserve territories and post-growth experimental areas. This model, that is here presented in its initial definitory phase, can help, tomorrow, structure a new approach to the spatial project of a Playmaker EU.

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