

Peter Ulrich: Participatory Governance in the Europe of Cross-Border Regions. Cooperation–Boundaries–Civil Society, 2021, Nomos (review)

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<https://doi.org/10.25167/brs3762>

Submitted: 20 Mar 2021; Accepted: 5 May 2021; Published: 10 May 2021

Citation (APA):

Elbel, O. (2021). Peter Ulrich: Participatory Governance in the Europe of Cross-Border Regions. Cooperation–Boundaries–Civil Society, 2021, Nomos (review). *Border and Regional Studies*, 9(1), 63-66.

Can a/the participative model of governance in cross-border regions work as a remedy for a long-standing democratic deficit of contemporary EU institutions? That is the main question Peter Ulrich poses in his dissertation that was published at the Nomos publishing house at the beginning of 2021. As an answer, Ulrich proposes a comprehensive analysis containing a profound theoretical framework and four case studies from various European contexts.

Completing Ph.D. studies at the Europa-Universität Viadrina, Peter Ulrich had an opportunity to experience how cross-border regions may thrive and fade in everyday life throughout the last years. Despite all promising developments in cross-border cooperation, boundaries still present some obstacles (Svensson & Balogh, 2018), and the COVID-19 crisis may be the most prominent example of re-bordering tendencies. In any case, Ulrich thinks across the borders (Paasi, 2009) and wants to explore the patterns of governance inside of the European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). As the establishment of such cross-border platforms can re-scale the notion of space in the borderlands (Nelles & Durand, 2014), Ulrich is interested in the political consequences. If the citizens may profit from cross-border working, shopping, or studying, will they be willing to use the cross-border region as a stage for civil society, too? In the exploratory study, Ulrich investigates the possible causal relationship between the permeability of nation-state borders and participatory governance with potential effects on the democratization of EU politics or innovation of governing. Each border consists of specific layers, and the question is how the character of borders influences the citizens' deliberation and co-creation on the cross-border platform.

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The theoretical framework (Chapter 2) does not only navigate through the book but may offer guidance for everyone who wants to get a basic theoretical understanding of key topics of the dissertation. Ulrich gives a strong emphasis on the conceptualization of participatory governance in the context of cross-border regions, and the readers can dive into the theory of democracy and elaborations about the meaning of civil society. Also, the debate on the evolution of cross-border regions in the EU is very illustrative and possibly helpful for students who would need a structured overview of the purpose and timeline of cross-border cooperation inside of the EU. Nevertheless, Ulrich does not only summarize the existing state of the art but creates his original synthesis.

The conceptualization and operationalization (Chapter 5) of key variables is an important strength of the study. Both independent (permeability of nation-state borders) and dependent variables (participatory governance) are constructed in a coherent way that ties the case studies together. Regarding the independent variable, the analytical model is based on the differentiation between geopolitical and socio-cultural boundaries (Haselsberger, 2014) and takes into consideration factors from high politics (territorial organization, supremacy, and statehood), low politics (paradiplomacy and cross-border regionalization), narratives (membership control) or other socio-cultural features (protection of collective memory, maintenance of commonalities).

The empirical part of the study (Chapters 6 and 7) is based on the interviews with representatives of Euroregions and EGTC's conducted in 2015 - 2016. Their answers form a pillar of the results together with general characteristics of given territories. For the comparative analysis, Ulrich chose the combination of most-likely and least-likely cases considering the extent of territorial autonomy and length of cross-border cooperation. Finally, four spaces were identified: EGTC Eurodistrict SaarMoselle, EGTC Tyrol – South Tyrol – Trentino, EGTC Galicia – Norte de Portugal, and EGTC (in-building) TransOderana. Throughout the reading of the results section, one general observation emerges. No matter how old the history of cross-border cooperation is or how persistent the geopolitical boundaries are, likely the most important factor for participatory governance is the citizen demand for joint cross-border initiatives. „Without the necessity to join forces across borders to jointly identify solutions to concrete problems, join cross-border politics involving different actors (i.e. administrators, businesses, and citizens) is unlikely. Therefore, demand is the basic ingredient for participatory governance in the EU CBRs for the CBR or its citizens“ (Ulrich, 2021, p. 635).

In three out of the four debated areas, no considerable extent of participatory governance was detected. The only case which partially confirmed the causal

relationship was the EGTC Tyrol – South Tyrol – Trentino. There are probably more decisive factors (e.g., cross-border regionalist identity, linguistic closeness, highly inclusive internal structure, federalized structure of both neighboring countries) that helped to broaden the citizen's participation. Among the remaining cases, there are always some obstacles (e.g., lack of mutual trust, prejudices about the other actors, weak motivation of citizens, legal-administrative barriers). In summary, Ulrich shows that it is highly complicated to create conditions for participatory governance in the EGTC's even though the cross-border regions are often labeled as a laboratory of European integration (Stokłosa, 2015).

Even in EGTC Tyrol – South Tyrol – Trentino, the level of citizen participation is limited, and this case excels mainly due to rather really weak results of others. Therefore, for the next research on participatory governance in the cross-border regions, it would be interesting to detect some successful cases of the cross-border region that mastered this virtue. The identification of role model may help scholars to analyze what the optimal conditions look like. That would be profitable for the quality of democracy in the EU itself. Another recommendation may be to control the quality of democracy on the local level in the conceptual model. Participatory democracy is often promoted on the level of local governance (Forde, 2005), and the good experience of citizens participating in local politics may bring a spillover effect to the cross-border level. Future studies can, on the contrary, discuss whether the cross-border regions are endowed by this democratic stage at all. It is still conceivable that the progress of democratic life in the European Union will occur on a different platform than cross-border regions.

It should be acknowledged that Ulrich managed to implement into the book some observations from the COVID-19 crisis (partially throughout the whole text and mainly in Epilogue) which has many impacts on border management throughout Europe (Medeiros et al., 2020). Unilateral or reciprocal closures of borders, the reintroduction of border controls, and other phenomena have prepared many questions for scholars who analyze cross-border regions. If one of the most burdensome obstacles for cross-border citizen participation is a lack of interest (Ulrich, 2021, p. 635), the COVID-19-related border measures can present an opportunity. The temporary suspension of freedom of movement in cross-border regions could be an important incentive for citizens to realize how interconnected the respective countries are and how much they need their counterparts. Demonstrations or petitions calling for free cross-border movement can, thus, be a milestone in a process of cross-border civil society formation. Further studies may show whether that has really been the case.

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