

Centrope as a laboratory of cross-border cooperation - lessons from 17 years of the Centrope region (2003-2019)

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Abstract

The idea of Centrope (Central European Region) was launched in September 2003 with the aim to profile the Central European Region as a framework for increasing wealth and sustainable development in area of living and working space for about 6 mln people. Cities, counties

and other territorial subjects in Austria, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia took part in this initiative. With its size, complexity of relations and thematic scope, Centrope became a laboratory of cross-border cooperation. Innovative solutions based on cross-border cooperation in all fields, including economy, politics, culture and education, were included in its vision and main objectives. The authors are looking into the development of this region over the past 17 years of its existence. Using semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, the initial expectations, its strengths and weaknesses as well as what lessons can be learned from this initiative for other cross-border areas in Europe are evaluated. Special attention is paid to the role of the two largest cities of this region, Vienna and Bratislava, and their cooperation, as well as their role for the region as a whole. Regional cooperation within the Centrope, its marketing communication as well as overall current state of art of the region and its future perspectives, are other thematic highlights of the critical revision, presented in this paper.

Keywords: CENTROPE, spatial development, vision, regional identity, sustainable regional development, multilevel polycentric governance.

1. Introduction

In 2003, in a small Austrian municipality of Kittsee, located on the border of Austria and Slovakia, very close also to the Hungarian border, mayors and heads of the regions from four European countries met and symbolically signed a document known later as the Kittsee declaration, in which they pledged to work closer together. This document was later deemed as the basis for the Centrope region, a cross-border initiative aiming at improving the quality of life in the region consisting of parts of Austria, Slovakia, Czechia and Hungary. The region includes two capitals, Vienna and Bratislava, which create its development poles, as well as numerous smaller towns with vivid connections among each other.

After 17 years of Centrope, the project had its ups and downs and currently is rather dormant. Centrope, with its unique position and high potential, is considered as a laboratory for cross-border cooperation and, in this paper, the objective is to critically evaluate the past development and how it influenced its

current state. The paper discusses the main expectations, how these were played out, what were the successes as well as limitations and, crucially, what are its future perspectives. It is based on a set of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 and at the beginning of 2019 with key stakeholders (former/current mayors, academics and administrative officers) where they were asked to comment (anonymously) on the past 17 years and discuss their perspectives. Many of the interviewees are retired and were offered an opportunity to look back at what they were working on and reflect as well as debate the future of Centrope.

2. Centrope as laboratory of a cross-border cooperation

Cross-border areas are specific areas on the interface of two or more countries having different administrative rules and regulations. The area of Centrope is unique as four countries meet in this territory with different political and administrative systems as well different history, culture and traditions. The events of early 1990s launched the processes of globalisation as well as economic and social transformation, which, together with the EU integration, led to diminishing role of national borders and this led to a change in how the border areas look like. Earlier, border areas were rather empty areas without strategic infrastructure and industry and with mostly agricultural land (e.g. Austrian region of Burgenland) while afterwards these areas became attractive for residents of all these countries. With increased mobility and softening of the national borders, Centrope became an opportunity to become a laboratory for cross-border cooperation and governance systems considering that governance is one of the main keys to the success of the process of European integration (CoR, 2020).

A multilevel polycentric governance is a concept describing the processes of re-location of authority away from central states (Schakel 2016) and enables more open and inclusive forms of governance. Not only the system begun to be multi-level with different decision-making centres at different levels (Hoodge, Marks, 1993), but it is also characterised by an increasing tendency to invite ac-

tors outside the hierarchical administrative arrangement (Jordan 2008). The multilevel polycentric governance is characteristic of flexibility and adaptability (Ostrom, Tiebout, Warren, 1961; Ostrom 2010), self-organisation, spontaneous development and experimentation (McGinnis 1999) and dealing with fuzziness – managing increased mobility of citizens and their belonging (Finka et al, 2015). In this paper, Centrope is presented as a laboratory of multilevel polycentric governance as it complies to many of these characteristics and what were the results of the cooperation activities is examined. The overall vision of the region was to become competitive on the European level using the potential of newly created attractive space for people where the polycentricity also represented the underlying spatial logics of hierarchy and complementarity (Humer, Granqvist, 2020) using the geographic and political opportunities of this area.

3. The Central European Region CENTROPE

3.1. What is Centrope?

A key feature of the multilevel polycentric governance is experimentation and self-organisation and, in this paper, Centrope is perceived as a laboratory of cross-border cooperation. The objective is to track how the activities of actors in Centrope were played out and evaluate their impacts based on the interviews with key stakeholders, performed in 2018 and 2019. Twelve interviews were performed and the respondents included former and current politicians, academics and public officers who had been directly and indirectly working on the Centrope projects. They had the opportunity to look back and reflect on what had been done, what was the initial idea, the successes and limitations, then the specific issues, e.g. financing, and, lastly, the future of Centrope.

Centrope was always an umbrella term for common vision, based upon common Central European heritage, merging Austrian, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian cities and regions in one mental concept backed by certain values. The perception of Centrope has been continuously evolving. Centrope is a vision

based upon the common Central European historical and cultural heritage integrating territorial subjects from four countries and giving them a common cooperative perspective (Fig. 1). This region was long split into different political systems and its spatial development was more influenced by national policies and specifics than a common Central European identity. However, it was still rooted in mental maps of inhabitants as a region which was never ripped off from its multicultural character, even during the times of hardest communist regime. The integrating elements were still present, even sometimes in deep historical memory or in unconsciousness in every-day practice (river Danube, Czech-Slovak close relations, legends about tram between Bratislava and Vienna). CENTROPE is also considered as an interesting tool how to help and coordinate cooperation between left and right bank of the Danube or the Danubian cooperation in general.

“Partners from Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary got an access toward highly developing common region in the heart of Europe and the Vienna as a international hub and the peripheral parts of Austria (Lower Austria, Burgenland) got new impulses for their development” (politician 1, Austria).

public. This was intensively reflected in the initial marketing activities and vocabulary (“we are growing together”).

Centrope is an interesting platform for cooperation of the cities. In the beginning, the regions might have played more vital role, but later the scope of cooperation was shifted towards the major cities as they were the key economic and political players. This gradual shift in the political driving force corresponds to the changing nature of cooperation and experimentation on the run, adjusting to the changing conditions and always looking for effective solutions.

“You hear word Centrope especially in politics talking about this big territory with Bratislava, Vienna, Brno and the Hungary part, because there is no word for this very functional related territory, so Centrope is somehow trying to define this area” (public officer 3, Austria).

“The iron curtain imposed a feeling of uneasiness of those living on the other side (Austrian), after its tearing down need for new direction in sense of making a common Central European region on a place that always was Central European hub, merging culture and traditions of Slovakia, Austria, Hungary and the Czech Republic” (politician 1, Austria).

3.2. Beginnings of the Centrope initiative and its key characteristics

Centrope was formally announced in 2003 when a political declaration was signed in Kittsee, a small Austrian municipality located on Slovak-Austrian border, by mayors and heads of the regions (counties of Vienna, Lower Austria, Burgenland, Southern Moravia, Southern Bohemia, Bratislava, Trnava, Győr-Moson-Sopron, Vas and cities of Brno, České Budějovice¹, Bratislava, Trnava, Győr, Eisenstadt, Sopron, Szombathely and St. Pölten).

The interviewees characterise Centrope as something unique, with great ambitions, trying to connect the states of the former Eastern and Western blocks.

¹ The region of Southern Bohemia and the city of České Budějovice later withdrew from the initiative, due to the fact that their cross-border functional ties are rather directed to Bavaria and Upper Austria.

It was reflecting the new political geography in which three of the four member states regained their geopolitical independence from the Soviet Union and were in the process of economic and social transition. On the Austrian side, as told by high positioned Austrian politician, the idea was to share the experience of good governance and learn from the mistakes Austrian had made in the past and foster good cooperation in economic, social and environmental terms.

The objective of this initiative was not only theoretical, as there have been functional relations developing since the 1990s but were missing institutionalisation. The location is unique, two capital cities located 60 km apart, position at the intersection of two axes of European significance – the Danube axis and the Pontebanna axis that leads from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea (DIANE 2003). Centrope was trying to define this area and create its vision and strategy to achieve these goals. But the geographical scope was much wider, it included the wide space between and around the capitals and the vision was covering this larger space encompassing this wide complexity of functional relations.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, there were several cross-border projects between Austria and Slovakia, Austria and Czechia and so on (Table 1) and these were looking into particular areas of life in this land. However, larger vision and strategy was absent and there was no forum where the city of Vienna, strong economic and political player was actively present. Centrope is a reflection of this state and is an answer to these issues. Many of the projects were funded by the European Union, and at that time it was clear that the three countries will soon join the EU and the EU was supporting projects to help these countries for smoother and less painful transition.

Table 1. Centrope – Key Dates

1989	Fall of the Iron Curtain
1995	Austria's EU entry
1997	Austria's Schengen entry
1990s / 2000s	Projects JORDES, JORDES+ (GrüneMitte)
2002	Austria introduced euro
2003	The Kittsee Centrope declaration
2003-2006	Interreg IIIA project "Building a European Region"
2004	Slovakia, Hungary and Czechia's EU entry
2004-2006	Project CentropeMAP – CentropeSTATISTICS
2007	Slovakia, Hungary and Czechia's Schengen entry
2007	Opening of Austria's A6 highway
2008	Cross-border bus line 901
2009	Slovakia introduced euro
2009-2012	Centrope Capacity project (OP CE)
2011	Opening of Austria's labour market
2012	Strategy Centrope 2013+
2012	Opening of the Bridge of Liberty
2015	BAUM city planning study
2017	BAUM 2020 project – opening of the office

Source: the authors

3.3. The idea of CENTROPE and its milestones

The name Centrope was created as a result of schoolchildren competition back in 2002, organised within the project CERNET, a cross-border cooperation educational project, and it stands for an acronym of the Central European Region consisting of areas within the quadrangle formed by the Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria. More than 100 schools took part in this proceeding and the

winning proposal was brought by the students of secondary school “KMS Josef Enslein-Platz” in Vienna. The name Centrope is sticking the basic semantic characteristics of region – CENTRAL and EUROPE. Under this name, the first cross-border Interreg III A project was launched.

The first milestone, as agreed on during the interviews, was the political declaration adopted in Kittsee in September 2003 (Centrope 2003), stressing the common goals, raising prosperity and sustainable development of newly established region. There have been defined several sectoral development perspectives including communication and public relations, labour market and qualification, tourism, science, research and innovation, culture and society, as well as cooperation management (cf. Krajatis et al, 2003; Jaššo 2009). The Kittsee declaration (2003) stressed the following statements:

- (1) establish Centrope as a common region of growth and prosperity and support all measures towards the attainment of this goal;
- (2) create an attractive, internationally respected quality location covering all areas of life and improve the frame conditions for cross-border cooperation; and
- (3) intensify cooperation by networking existing initiatives, communicate the future potential of the region to the public at large and strengthen the social and entrepreneurial commitment to the Central European Region.

Furthermore, the Kittsee declaration (2003) reflects the EU enlargement as a unique chance for ongoing cooperation with the main goal to build up a cooperative and robust framework for cooperation of institutions, companies and other bodies located within the region. After the initial Kittsee declaration in 2003 (‘Building an European Region’), a series of political memoranda followed (cf. Centrope 2006; Jaššo 2009). The memoranda and common meetings of stakeholders predestined future vectors of the Centrope development and were clearly dominated by optimistic, future-oriented and progressive attitudes of main actors. A series of political memoranda significantly contributed to the building the

capacity, outlining the structures and defining the context of the CENTROPE region activities (political memorandum 'We grow together, Together we grow', 2005, St. Pölten; conference 'We Shape the Future - CENTROPE 2006+', 2006, Vienna City Hall; political conference Bratislava 2007 - 'Ready for Take-off').

However, the interviewees had a hard time naming any of these conferences after the initial one in 2003, which was nearly by all noted as the first and the key milestones. None of them considered any of these as a break-through with the lasting impacts until now. As milestones, they named pilot projects, e.g. Centrope Map or other EU funded projects which were implemented under the Centrope headline and then some mentioned the important events for the member countries, e.g. the EU and/or Schengen accessions, which considerably shaped the region. One respondent critically commented that signing a document is no true milestone and that real milestones were rather absent in the Centrope initiative as that would be some break in the quality of cooperation (e.g. establishment of a coordination centre or a governance body). This is a sign of lacking a long-term impact of the initiative as the first milestone is clear and from then on it is somehow intangible and hard to name, mimicking the decreasing momentum of Centrope over time.

The years 2003-06 were predominantly dedicated to the building of sectoral networks and political structures (cf. Fertner 2006: 76-77). Additional boost and dynamics was gained after 1st May 2004, the day of accession of Slovakia, Czechia and Hungary toward the European Union. This act has delivered an elimination of almost all restrictions and increased economic convergence.

One of the most significant competitive advantages of the Centrope region is its scientific profile. More than 25 universities and academic bodies are based in the region and their cooperation with the business institutions is intensively promoted in all the four member countries. Centrope is striving to maintain its identity as a sustainable region, stressing its natural landscape potential.

3.4. Initial expectations for Centrope initiative

Centrope was always considered a part (or at least closely related process) of the EU enlargement. Established on the eve of the EU accession of Slovakia, Czechia and Hungary (2004), this initiative reflected not only the general mood of public and its pro-European stances of that era, but was (openly or unspoken) considered as “the lab” testing mutual merger processes of the old and new EU member countries. Despite the intensive cultural compatibility among the participating regions and cities, the degree of economic convergence was rather low, especially between Austria and the newly accessed states. Centrope was also considered as an opportunity to test whether such a kind of cooperation is able to deliver win-win solution for all sides. From accessing countries, it was also perceived as a helping tool for integration of these regions/cities into the EU.

“Basically, the idea of Centrope was to prepare these regions for joining the EU. And everybody also expected a lot of support from the EU to these regions” (a private planning consultant, Austria).

“The expectations were pretty high. Due to the abolishing of physical barriers, it was supposed that national borders will diminish its role and the ties between the regional centres will be intensive. But I don’t think these expectations were fulfilled” (public officer 2, Slovakia).

Centrope was – especially in the beginning – more a vision reflecting cross-border related social and political atmosphere than a concrete development plan for certain region. The first years of new millennium were times when participating partners did already have some experiences from bilateral cross-border cooperation and this cooperation yielded some distinctive results. Most of the actors realised that, in this territory, there is a lot of options going beyond simple bilateral cross-border cooperation activities and might create unique synergy pattern helping the actors to achieve new quality in terms of international competitiveness, quality of life, sustainability and other relevant issues.

“In the beginning, Centrope was a visionary approach, not so much linked to the territory it refers to” (public officer 3, Austria).

“New bridges have been built and the 'mental landscape' of the people has got completely new shape. Nobody is now 'on the edge' or 'on the periphery' anymore” (politician 1, Austria).

Several respondents expressed the opinion that the initial expectations related to Centrope initiative were flying high, but reality delivered an array of setbacks and some kind of delusion. The initial optimistic idea was not strong enough to be carried into continual efforts of all parties. It was reflected in many other topics targeted in the interviews and might be the confirmation of the general trend of high emotional involvement in the beginning, which was later fading away or was transformed into more pragmatic approach based upon rather incremental field, specific range of activities. High political/emotional capital of the Centrope idea has been continuously somehow melt down and new vision is still lacking.

“There was big engagement and somehow exaggerated expectation in the beginning[...] till the delusion that it is nor working anymore, it was too ambitious” (public officer 2, Slovakia).

“Of course, we wanted to, for keeping the balance, our interest was that the economic situation improves as quick as possible, also on the side of the wages. So this gap on the Hungarian-Austrian, Slovak-Austrian was to disappear as quick as possible. Nowadays this appears in the city of Bratislava mainly and in some other core places alongside the Austrian-Hungarian border, but not for the whole country” (politician 2, Austria).

3.5. Changes over the past 17 years

The overall very enthusiastic atmosphere from the first post-millennial years (2000-2005) has somehow faded away. It was transformed to “everyday business” atmosphere, even with some setbacks and delusions. Dreams were

transformed into particular projects, initiatives and cooperation and some of them slowed down or even petered out. Despite smooth and friendly mutual relations, the strong “pro-European” feeling has been replaced by more pragmatic and even critical approach.

“We are much more careful and we consider thoroughly what has some added value and what does not [...].We all are growing up and we have more experiences and we can compare things” (public officer 1, Slovakia).

“I think the atmosphere of common cross border initiative was something special in the founding years of Centrope. Meanwhile, it depends on the issue. For example in cross-border mobility between Austria and Slovakia, there are still many issues unsolved, for example the connection between capitals and it’s the same towards the Hungarian part and so on, but some things are rather normal, for example in tourism” (an academician, Austria).

“We had at the beginning a rather euphoric situation. The expectation to become a member of the EU on the one side, our experience is, and I remember the days when we started to negotiate with the EU back in the late 1980s, beginning of the 1990s” (politician 2, Austria).

National borders started to play a (limited) role again – not in the former extreme scale, but borders and national interests became again topics of political discourse (at least from the peak of migration crisis in 2015). Overall political shifts in society (in all the four participating countries) tend to favour “national approach” again, though it was not transformed onto any cross-border disputes or controversies.

“Creating of the V4 cooperation was something that was rather disrupting the continuous process of EU integration. It stopped the integration process and ended up with a sort of new opposition on the EU level. That, of course, makes cooperation more difficult” (politician 2, Austria).

“At many of political parties they do not fight against this, rather they use this atmosphere for their politics and it could have been even an advantage this kind of anti-

European atmosphere for the Centrope initiative[...]. The common enemy EU” (public officer 1, Austria).

“When Győr should have taken over the presidency in Centrope they were stopped by the national government, they were not allowed to. That was actually the breakdown of very close cooperation” (politician 2, Austria).

3.6. Successes of the Centrope

After more than two decades of relatively intense communication, at least at the very beginning of Centrope, it is difficult to state the tangible outcomes of the cooperation from the quantitative and objective point of view. The biggest successes are qualitative attributes of improved cooperation through getting to know other and introducing the idea that the people are not anymore living in separate countries, but they belong to one common space, which is difficult to measure.

Although it sounds perhaps as a minor thing today, the greatest success of the Centrope initiative is, arguably, launching the process of getting to know each other and beginning of cooperation via communication and mutual understanding, as one Austrian politician remarked. Centrope certainly played a key role in this process of convergence of nations. This is particularly crucial considering the second half of 20th century when all the previous communication channels and contacts between Austria and the former Eastern bloc countries had been intermitted and the process of re-familiarisation and gaining back the trust was particularly important and hindersome. Though, even before 2003, there were some smaller project initiatives, but their reach was limited in thematic and geographical scope. It was the Kittsee declaration, a success on its own, which launched continuous communication on formal (political conferences) and informal (workshops and non-official meetings) level, which gave roots to communication until today.

“We created the standards of communication and negotiation, we got to know the people which definitely led to better understanding in this region. In the past there was no real cooperation” (public officer 1, Slovakia).

“For other projects it is easier to call someone in Bratislava or development partner, we know some people there, they can help” (public officer 1, Austria).

Another success, as perceived by Centrope stakeholders, was creation of the Centrope brand. Although Centrope as a brand is seen now rather critically (low diffusion towards the citizens, it is not recognized by businesses, etc.), it was the first time in the history when this territory was portrayed as one unit under a common brand which is accepted by partners from all countries. There is a long way to go if one attempts to further promote the Centrope brand to wider stakeholders or when you put efforts into making citizens identify themselves as Centrope citizens as there are issues of national sovereignty in contemporary climate, but this is not the goal anymore as people no longer identify themselves as trapped within national borders. However, in the early years of Centrope it smoothed the road to *Europeanship* and identifying citizens as part of the EU.

“The biggest success was to create this image at all, which is still very much alive” (an academician, Austria).

“Even if there are low cooperation fields, there is also the brand Centrope and the focus is that I am the member of this Centrope region” (public officer 2, Austria).

3.7. Limitations of the Centrope

During the course of the past 17 years since Centrope had been operating, some problems were occurring which revealed practical obstacles of the cross-border cooperation in this region. On the one hand, there had been several rather formal issues connected to daily operation of the initiative including language differences (four languages from three language groups) or various bureaucratic procedures differing according to the legal system leading to lack of understanding of the processes and a loss of cooperation dynamics. On the other hand,

though, had identified three core problems were identified which are permeating until today. Firstly, there is a problem with political will and cooperation being on the political agenda. The declaration in Kittsee from 2003 is regarded as a great success due to the fact that all the members were able to find consensus and signed the memorandum of cooperation, but ever since, the political priorities had been changing. Obviously, one key driver of this change was the economic crisis in 2008-09 and later on changing of the political climate in the EU linked to the migration crisis of 2015 etc. and these shifts in thinking of national and regional politicians was clearly readable within Centrope. Another issue linked to the politics was the fact that the Centrope representatives failed to make it attractive to wider audience in regional and local politics.

“One of the biggest limitations was the fact that you would have need a lot of political power and courage to get forward” (public officer 3, Austria).

“A lack of ‘personal continuity’ – new mayors, politicians” (politician 1, Austria).

Secondly, while the role of the borders had been changing and its importance had diminished in terms of their barrier effect, the differences among the Centrope countries remained. This was evident in terms of cultural and historical differences, as well as differences in the political and administrative systems (so-called multilevel mismatch – Telle 2017). This was clear not only between the old and new EU member countries (Austria vs the rest), but also between Slovakia and Hungary, etc. Closely linked to this issue was the matter of superiority or feeling of inferiority by representatives of Slovak regions when negotiating with their Austrian counterparts.

“Paradoxically, it is the borders of the nation states as well as distribution of competences, in Slovakia we have local, regional and national level and it works similarly in neighbouring countries and there is too many actors with different competences” (public officer 2, Slovakia).

“I think there is still this cultural difference, cultural-historical, some kind of, I don’t want to say superiority or even snobbery[...] it took us more time and energy to convince partners about our truth [arguments], about our view. Sometimes we even had to bring it to the boil to push our ideas” (public officer 1, Slovakia).

Lastly, the PR activities and branding did not turn out to be as powerful when creating a common image and identity to overcome and sustain the rather narrow perception of sovereignty and *“nationalism”* (vs common European or Centrope identity). In the beginning, the branding was regarded as a priority and focal point, but despite the used finances it did not succeed in creating a common brand of Centrope that would be taken up by actors from public and private realm nor a sort of common identity among the citizens.

“Maybe it is a lack of PR to its local citizens” (public officer 1, Austria).

“We did not manage to successfully ‘sell’ the outputs and benefits, like the bridge between Schlosshof and Devínska Nová Ves – this is the Centrope in everyday life” (politician 1, Austria).

5. Key lessons

5.1. Flexibility in the reflection of overall socio-political climate (*Zeitgeist*)

Each period in time carries some trends which are reflected in the public spirit and has potential to impassion the people. In the case of Centrope, in 1990s the region was optimistic in research and technology bringing many research-intensive companies to this area. In 2000s, it was the EU integration that was raising the spirits in all the four countries and it was catalysing the differences among the nations. However, after the financial and migration crises this *Zeitgeist* is somewhat difficult to recognize and be strong enough to raise the public spirit. Without such an identification it is difficult to accomplish common projects and common vision as the incentive for common effort is missing and unjustified. Such a common notion is painfully absent and it is supposed to be a reason behind the growing nationalism and isolationism.

5.2. Mutual coordination of activities and vision

From the governance point of view, Centrope failed to make flexible and sustainable governance arrangements which would carry on the management of activities after the projects finished. The parties were not able to agree on common governance mode which would coordinate the activities in the region under the umbrella vision. Centrope was certainly serving its purpose in bringing the four countries closer together in 2000s and it created its visions, but these were not strong enough in the past five years to inspire cooperation and coordination of common activities. Inability to create convincing vision operating under appropriate and effective governance mode was the root cause of Centrope's inactivity in the recent years. In such a state, some parties are working on smaller projects, but are not organised and coordinated with objective to support the common vision.

5.3. Interactive work with the public

Lastly, Centrope failed to be transmitted into the public discourse and the support of its brand is absent. In early beginnings, when the idea was taking shape, there were participatory launching activities, for example the process of naming this region by schoolchildren, but afterwards, gradually, the target group became academia and political level, omitting the public, NGOs or businesses who would genuinely carry the brand and identify themselves with it. This is why among these actors the brand of Centrope is virtually dead, failing to carry any mental image behind. The support of the public and local businesses helps the region inwards (creating a sense of common identity) as well as outwards (these actors can carry this brand behind its borders and help to recognize it).

6. Conclusions

In 2020, the Centrope region will record its 17th anniversary and critical revision of this invaluable attempt to create a real European cross-border region became necessary. The region was closely related to the EU enlargement of the former communist bloc countries in Central Europe and was considered as ‘unique laboratory’ testing mutual merger processes of old and new EU member countries with all the used and missed opportunities, highlights and setbacks. With changing atmosphere and conditions in Europe, more laboratories like this are necessary together with stronger focus on disseminating the results and their diffusion to regional policies.

The birth of the Centrope idea reflected more than anything else the *Zeitgeist* of the first years of new millennium in Central Europe. The will to cooperate and synchronised effort to build up successful, competitive and sustainable region in the heart of Europe was obvious in almost all participating actors. The initial expectations related to Centrope initiative were flying high, but reality delivered not only substantial improvement of cooperation and overall competitiveness of the region but also an array of setbacks and some kind of delusion. The overall very enthusiastic atmosphere from the first post-millennial years (2000-2005) has somehow faded away. The attention of the politicians, regional decision-makers and the general public had been shifted to other different themes and scopes.

Centrope as a somehow academic and political idea was transformed to the “business as usual” atmosphere and national borders started to play a (limited) role again – not in the former extreme scale, but borders and national interests became again the topics of the political discourse. These overall modifications and shifts were rather smooth and continuous, without any substantial rifts of conflicts. In some respects, Centrope successfully delivered its contribution to regional development and transformed the area toward more mutually inter-linked entity based on the common mutual trust but lost its momentum to adjust

to newly formed conditions. In other aspects, some expectations were never met and dropped out from the formulation of further common strategic visions and goals. Almost two decades after its birth, Centrope is more pragmatic and day-to-day oriented than it once was. Centrope acknowledged its limits in the process of building the place attachment of the people, their territorial identification and feeling of togetherness as well as in the process of building a competitive external image worldwide. However, new impulse is needed; previously it was Vienna as the strongest player driving the cooperation and right now, as the other players caught up, a cross-border cooperation needs new driving forces. The seat is empty and awaits its new leader who learnt from previous mistakes and will build up the Centrope foundations.

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