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## EDITORIAL

### Adaptive Territorial Governance in the Face of COVID-19

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#### Introduction

During the last few decades, extreme weather events and global and regional economic crises have been forcing us to rethink the way that governments approach territorial development. The inherent links between social, economic, and ecological systems are proving to be increasingly significant, and exist only in a complex whole characterised by multiple feedbacks (Berkes et al. 2002). In this light, managing the relationship between the social, economic, and ecological aspects of development is of paramount importance for those interested in establishing sustainable development trajectories in the long-run. This is particularly true since the COVID-19 pandemic has added further entropy to the picture of socio-ecological interactions. During the early stages of the pandemic, decision making, regulations, and communication had converged at the national level. However, throughout the course of the pandemic, there has been growing room for improvement in policy-making. As such, there is a need to rethink development objectives and their governance according to a new long-term perspective – one that takes better account of different issues and needs. Key concepts such as multi-level governance, place-based development, circular economy, and the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals can all help Western Balkan countries to achieve a better quality of life while preserving productivity, social inclusion, and the environment (Cotella and Vitale Brovarone, 2020).

However, to develop territorial governance systems to support secure, long-term societal development is particularly challenging (Lambin, 2005), and requires the introduction of forms of territorial governance that explicitly take into account the possibility for immediate and long-term change (Dietz et al., 2003; Folke et al., 2005). 'Adaptive' governance models and mechanisms are those that are able to address uncertainty through continuous learning and feature the involvement of multiple actors and levels in decision and policy making processes. Continuous knowledge sharing and learning is indeed a critical component when facing complex dynamics and uncertainty. It can be stimulated by networks that enable interaction between individuals and institutions at multiple levels and use those interactions to draw upon various knowledge systems and develop better policies (Adger, 2001; Olsson et al., 2006). In this light, adaptive territorial governance models rely on polycentric institutional arrangements that operate at multiple scales (McGinnis, 1999), balancing between centralised

and decentralised control (Imperial, 1999). At the same time, these models should be flexible enough to re-organise and re-form through institutional arrangements that encourage reflection and innovative responses (Brunner et al., 2005; Folke et al., 2005).

Since the first appearance of the concept in the early 2000s, (Dietz et al., 2003), the boundaries of adaptive governance have evolved significantly, particularly in relation to the governance of territorial development. However, an explicit research agenda on the matter has yet to coalesce. A synthesis of the literature concerning adaptive governance may contribute to the quest for new models of territorial governance that address the dynamic, large-scale nature of the most pressing crises, such as the 2008 global financial crisis that still projects its shadow over our economies and, more urgently, the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Serving as an introduction to the 2020 Annual Review of Territorial Governance in the Western Balkans, this editorial focuses on the concept of adaptive territorial governance in the face of COVID-19, with particular reference to the Western Balkan Region. After this brief introduction, the concept of adaptive governance is detailed in relation to its evolving boundaries. The challenges that may undermine the implementation of adaptive governance in practice are then reflected upon before a number of tentative research avenues in relation to the Western Balkans are brought forward. Finally, the various contributions that compose this volume and the way that each contributes to the debate are introduced to the reader.

### **Adaptive Territorial Governance: Conceptual Boundaries**

The concept of adaptive governance first emerged in relation to the management of institutional interactions in complex systems (Dietz et al., 2003; Walker et al., 2004; Folke et al., 2005), particularly as a consequence of the multiple uncertainties associated with global environmental change. According to these pioneering contributions, top-down territorial governance systems are unable to match the relevant scale of socio-economic and ecological complexity, especially in the face of rapid change (Cumming et al., 2006). Similarly, hierarchical governance often fails to provide effective solutions for highly contextualized situations, falling short in coordinating governance across multiple jurisdictional boundaries (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006). In response, a growing number of bottom-up approaches have emerged through local social networks, often under the collaborative initiative of community leaders sensing the need for alternatives to top-down government and new approaches to decision making (Weber, 2003). However, these local governance initiatives often suffer from coordination problems across complex geographies due to the lack of overarching arrangements able to approach 'soft spaces' with 'fuzzy boundaries' in a flexible way (Haughton et al., 2009; Faludi, 2018). Additionally, they often defect in terms of legitimacy, accountability, and inclusiveness, ignoring the voices of those stakeholders who are marginalized by dominant power relations (Swyngedow, 2005).

Acknowledging these challenges, adaptive governance emerged as a possible solution to the quest for new approaches to territorial governance capable of tackling large-scale problems in a way that is flexible and responsive enough to adjust to complex, unpredictable feedbacks between social, economic, and ecological components. The first contribution introducing the concept dates back to 2003, when Dietz et al. articulated the need for a more 'adaptive' governance of socioeconomic and environmental systems. This called for continuous shifts in the scale and in the actor constellation to be involved in the governance process. The authors suggested that effective governance conditions would ideally manifest within systems in which (Dietz et al., p.1908): (i) resources and their use can be monitored, verified, and understood through a relatively low effort; (ii) dynamics of change are slow or moderate; (iii) networks of

actors are dense and consolidated; (iv) outsiders can be excluded at a relatively low cost and (v) users are engaged in effective monitoring and enforcement. At the same time, however, they recognise that these conditions rarely exist in coordination with one another or at once, with most territorial governance scenarios having to deal with incomplete information and conflicting and ever-evolving values and preferences (Ostrom, 2005). As a consequence, governance models should be flexible enough to accommodate the feedbacks originating both in the territorial and actor spheres. This can be achieved through an iterative and inclusive dialogue between actors and within a complex, multi-layered system of institutions that facilitate experimentation, learning, and change.

Since this seminal contribution from Dietz et al., the literature on adaptive governance has begun to approach territorial systems in terms of 'resilience', i.e. their capacity to absorb natural and human impacts while still maintaining their structure and function (Holling, 2001; Folke, 2007). Resilience scholars call for adaptive governance models to deal with uncertainty in the face of unexpected disturbance or sudden change by either increasing the resilience of existing systems or facilitating their transformation (Walker et al., 2004; Folke et al., 2005). Using the terms 'adaptability' and 'transformability' to define properties of a territorial system and its associated governance institutions, Walker et al. (2004) situate adaptive governance in the context of scholarship on resilience, arguing that governing a territorial system from a resilience perspective shifts the role of governance institutions from limiting change to managing and shaping the ability of a system to cope with, adapt to, and allow for further change. Many of the early empirical and theoretical contributions to adaptive governance are framed in terms of adaptive co-management, often used synonymously (e.g. in Olsson et al., 2007; Huitema et al., 2009). According to Plummer et al. (2013), adaptive governance builds on foundational sources from the adaptive co-management literature and may be considered as the organizational context necessary to actively manage resilience in territorial systems (Folke et al., 2005).

Importantly, the first comprehensive set of criteria necessary for a successful transition towards adaptive governance are detailed by Folke et al. (2005). In their work, they highlight that most criteria are a function of social capital and include knowledge generation and learning, organizational learning, collaboration, devolution of management rights or power sharing, participation, organizational flexibility, trust, leadership, social memory, and the formation of actor groups or teams. At the same time, they also argue that adaptive territorial governance should be characterized by scaled approaches to resource management provided for and coordinated within an adaptive and collaborative learning environment fostered by adaptive governance. In order to create such an environment, adaptive governance requires functioning social networks that connect individuals and organizations across multiple levels and scales and that strengthen the capacity for taking advantage of windows of opportunity for transitions toward more flexible and adaptive models and mechanisms.

While adaptive governance was developing within resilience scholarship, authors in other fields started to adopt the term to explain governance changes with relation to the emergence of community-based natural resource management. In the volume *Adaptive Governance: Integrating Science, Policy, and Decision Making*, Brunner et al. use the concept as a framework for adapting "policy decisions to real people [...] on the ground" (Brunner et al., 2005, p.19). They suggest that adaptive governance cannot be reduced to a list of specific prescriptions but is context-dependent, and thus should be analysed through an exploration of the 'pattern of practices' to be read in the particular contextual conditions within which they developed. Altogether, the cases collected in the book highlight the importance of local initiatives for resolving small-scale contestations over resource use, often involving livelihoods that are

seemingly incompatible with larger-scale policy directions (Chaffin et al., 2014). Although adaptive governance initiatives seem to have the potential to infuse larger-scale policy-making with local knowledge and capacity, community-based initiatives often suffer from a lack of governing authority, legitimacy, funding, and sustained leadership. Furthermore, they function at a scale that is smaller than most of the territorial systems they rely on, leaving them vulnerable to changes outside of their sphere of influence (Brunner et al., 2005). Taking this into account, adaptive governance should bridge locally-oriented practices with wider-scale interests and initiatives to develop improved policy frameworks that guarantee their coordination and organisation.

### **Main Challenges to Adaptive Territorial Governance**

Whereas adaptive governance models and mechanisms certainly present multiple advantages, empirical studies on the matter have shed light on the existence of a range of impediments to their introduction. Whereas decision and policy makers may be willing to embrace new governance mechanisms and practices, they are often constrained by traditional arrangements, limited institutional capacity, as well as concerns regarding the potential risks that come with the new configurations (Berisha et al., 2020). Drawing on insights gained from a critical literature review on the matter, Rijke et al. (2012) argue that constraints to the uptake of adaptive governance relate, to a large extent, to the inability of practitioners and policy makers to cope with complexity and uncertainty, in particular:

- (i) the ambiguous purposes and objectives of what should be achieved;
- (ii) the unclear contextual conditions in which governance takes place; and
- (iii) the uncertainty around the effectiveness of different governance strategies.

Building on the traditional literature depicting the shift from government to governance, they argue that the process that should lead to the identification of the purpose of governance is often not straightforward, due to the different priorities of the various stakeholders involved. Such diversity of values often leads to a 'paralysis' in which the actors involved in the process confront each other with different understandings of the problem and proposed paths of action. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the actual governance purpose may raise questions in relation to who is legitimated to take decisions, as well as to what dimensions and aspects of sustainability should be prioritised (Smith and Stirling, 2010). Hence, ambiguous governance purposes resulting from a differential range of values creates a significant challenge for applying adaptive governance.

The unclear, ever-changing contextual conditions within which governance takes place also constitute a challenge for implementation. Territorial systems are complex systems that evolve through continuous interactions between territorial characteristics, the governance system, and civil society. Hence, changing conditions in the social and physical context of territorial systems influence the effectiveness of governance to serve a specific purpose. Adaptive governance, in particular, should rely on networks that connect actors (individuals, organisations, and institutions) at multiple organisational levels (Folke et al., 2005). Its effectiveness to solve complex problems depends on the combination of network structure and context (Turrini et al., 2010). As such, any framework conceptualisation merely identifies the elements and general relationships that need to be considered for institutional analysis, without providing policy makers with the specific methods through which to develop effective governance strategies (Ostrom, 2011).

Finally, as governance relies on networks that connect actors at multiple organisational levels, analysing relations between actors helps to understand how social structures may enhance or hinder effective governance. Although the effectiveness of networks to solve complex problems depends on a combination of network structure and context, decision and policy makers have a tendency to develop holistic, blueprint solutions that fail to take uncertainty and the complex dynamics of governance systems into account. Prediction and control approaches are derived from mechanistic thinking in which system behaviours and responses can be predicted; optimal control strategies can be designed within regulatory frameworks that are shaped by technical norms and legal prescriptions (Pahl-Wostl, 2007). However, policy makers and practitioners continue to struggle with setting learning goals and expectations, defining adequate learning mechanisms, and identifying who should be involved in learning processes (Armitage et al., 2008). In turn, this hampers their ability to develop adaptive governance strategies that rely on continuous learning.

### **Adaptive Territorial Governance in the Western Balkans. Towards a Research Agenda**

The above review has introduced a number of issues that are relevant for the territorial development and governance context at the core of this Annual Review. It is nonetheless worth reflecting on a number of possible research paths in order to explore the potential for introducing and consolidating adaptive governance models and mechanisms within the institutional framework of the Western Balkan Region. Today, the Western Balkans are a heterogeneous macro-region, featuring numerous challenges to territorial development: institutional corruption, informal economic and land development, weak and often ineffective participation in public processes, and a low awareness of environmental issues (TG-WeB, 2018). At the same time, all countries in the region are progressively integrating into the European Union (EU), a process that is introducing additional governance levels and the devolving central powers to subnational levels as well as to functional regions that transcend administrative boundaries. More adaptive governance approaches could help to deal with these challenging trends, fostering the mutual cooperation of different countries and supporting the creation of networks on common issues, problems, and actions, both in a top-down and bottom-up fashion. Networking and cooperation among actors from various Balkan countries is a very challenging task, as networks are expected to not only understand and fulfil the requirements of a highly globalised territorial development, but also to intrinsically understand the endogenous needs of local societies. To this end, more adaptive governance models and mechanisms could constitute an added value.

The review presented here has suggested that adaptive territorial governance is essential for dealing with the complexity and uncertainty associated with rapid global changes. This will be of utmost importance in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, adaptive governance cannot be created by a unilateral action of government, as it is highly context-dependent, rather fuzzy, and often organised symbiotically with the territorial system within which it develops. As a consequence, a transition towards more adaptive governance cannot be imposed, but can be encouraged through interventions aimed at raising institutional and adaptive capacity. The latter may emerge when actors, networks, and organizations initiate a transformation in search of a new, more desirable state of environmental governance or when they reorganize in response to perturbations such as policy windows, funding opportunities, and/or particular shocks to the system.

Adaptive governance represents a link between the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development and takes into account the dynamic evolution of

these dimensions and the complex, mutual interrelations that links them and their inherent uncertainty. Born from the social will to manage territorial development reflexively and holistically, adaptive governance cannot be realized without functioning social networks. Such networks create cross-level and cross-scale linkages that allow for broad participation and experimentation, harmonization at a system-wide scale, and the establishment of a culture of learning that increases knowledge generation and sharing across a multilevel governance structure. Adaptive governance theoretically culminates in coordination at a macro-regional scale – a scale at which the governance structure best fits the function of coordinating and harmonising territorial development patterns and trajectories. The Western Balkan Region constitutes an interesting test-bed due to the rather fluid structure of governance and the institutions that characterise the various countries.

To this end, further research is required to explore a number of avenues and, in turn, provide meaningful and timely guidance to actors at the various levels in the process. Firstly, it would be relevant to explore the relationship between the conceptual boundaries between the principle of adaptive governance and those that fall under the heading of ‘good’ territorial governance (ESPON, 2014; Nadin et al., 2018). Whereas these areas of inquiry may be understood as separate (one focused on the governance of ecological systems and one focused on purely societal issues of legitimacy, equity, and justice) it may be worth combining them based on the assumption that the resilience and desirability of the social system is equally important to that of the ecological system. Another promising field of inquiry concerns the necessary preparations to take advantage of windows of opportunity in order to increase the likelihood of successful transformations towards more adaptive models of governance. Since such windows will certainly open up within the framework of the EU integration process, actors should be ready to seize various opportunities and come forward with coordinated actions and arrangements that concern the whole region to acquire a critical mass in their interactions with the EU. Finally, the many barriers to implementing adaptive governance that still exist within the institutional and organization frameworks of the Western Balkan countries deserve further attention. Interventions to support the emergence of adaptive governance when a window of opportunity opens should be prioritised, together with specific changes in the law that are necessary to open up policy space and allow further flexibility.

Each of these research avenues calls for the development of an empirical record and an increased effort to explore case studies of both successful and unsuccessful transformations toward adaptive governance in the region. With particular reference to unsuccessful transitions, researchers should pay attention to the politics of adaptive governance to define the roles of power, equity, and justice in fostering or inhibiting transformations. To address these questions, the Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance (<http://tg-web.eu/>) constitutes an important platform of interaction and knowledge transfer. Its activities form an ideal framework within which to open up a discussion about the results that the transition towards more adaptive governance models and mechanisms produces in practice. This volume and the contributions it includes are a direct product of these activities.

## **A Roadmap for the Reader**

This issue of the Annual Review of Territorial Governance in the Western Balkans positions itself within the aforementioned debate on adaptive territorial governance with particular attention to the consequences of and the reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to the medium and long-term policies that may be adopted to face its aftermath and future uncertainties. It assembles a number of contributions focusing on a rather heterogeneous set of issues,

providing insights on the region and its governance from both a conceptual and a practical perspective. Together, the various articles seek to provide the reader with different entry points into the state of art of territorial governance in the Western Balkans, offering food for thoughts on how to make the latter more adaptive.

In the first contribution, Andreas Faludi frames the issue of government and governance in the Western Balkan region in the light of the contents of his most recent editorial effort (Faludi, 2018). The author reflects on the need for a common perspective on territorial governance in a context in which the powers and resources of governments still vary and are dependent on the acquiescence and active support of other actors. While reflecting on the ongoing EU enlargement process, the contribution argues that this could occur through the formation of tailor-made communities following functional or cultural lines, resulting in multiple, overlapping spaces that deal with issues in areas fit-for-purpose. However fuzzy, the resulting pattern could be characterised by the capacity to adapt to situations on the ground that are not easily managed within traditional administrative arrangements.

After this inspiring framework, the following two contributions focus on how the field of tourism could constitute an interesting field to study 'softer' territorial governance processes. Enrico Porfido reflects upon the need and potentials for a joint tourism development policy for the Western Balkan region through a comparison of the strategies undertaken. In his contribution, countries are grouped by policy characteristics and analysed in relation to the magnitude of investments as well as the policies' evaluation and implementation. The study highlights a number of common elements across the various policies, resulting in a competition among countries for the same tourism market portion. The paper suggests that a common tourism policy could connect the efforts of the involved actors, enhancing the competitiveness of the region at a global scale.

Whereas the potentials for development linked to tourism are undoubtable, this sector has been severely challenged by the COVID-19 emergency. Peter Nientied and Dritan Shutina shed light on this matter in their contribution, making the case for a transition to a post-COVID-19 tourism model as opposed to a return to the status quo. The authors discuss the current uncertainties of the tourism economy in the region in light of a number of international policy frameworks such as Next-Generation Europe and the European Green Deal. Ultimately, the suggested transition should entail the development of a more adaptive and resilient tourism sector through policies and practices that picture the regions as an integrated destination.

The reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic is also the central focus of the contribution authored by Ledio Allkja and Esmerina Hidri, which reflects upon the role, challenges, and opportunities for universities and socio-cultural institutions. The authors argue that the pandemic has hit socio-cultural services hard; they were quickly shut down and transferred to virtual platforms. Despite this generating factor, the ongoing transition offers interesting prospects for future policies in terms of increasing the resilience of services as well as institutionalizing new ways, norms, and practices of doing things.

The fifth article included in this volume reflects upon the impact of the pandemic on municipal finances. Here Merita Toska, Marjan Nikolov, and Vesna Garvanlieva Andonova analyse how the outbreak of COVID-19 positioned municipalities at the forefront of the emergency, challenging them with the increased need to protect their communities and ensure the continuity of their activities despite financial constraints. Their work provides a picture of the impact of the pandemic on municipal finances, particularly in relation to the Albanian and North



Macedonia governments' interventions. Overall, the authors argue that in view of the expected lower revenues, and added pressures for expenditures and unbalanced cash-flows, it will be imperative for local authorities to regain financial control in order to avoid liquidity shortages and equip themselves with adequate finances.

A further exploration of the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic is proposed by Hristo Dokov, Kalina Milkova, and Ivaylo Stamenkov, who present a spatial analysis in the Bulgarian context to provide a wide picture on the occurring changes. Through their analysis, the authors reflect on the key factors that drive the processes and determine the intensity, scale, and persistence of the immediate multidimensional impacts of the outbreak and their territorial implications. Through a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches, they show that the COVID-19 crisis has severely impacted the country, although differentially across territories, generating significant entropy and uncertainty.

The governance of transboundary water basins lies at the focus of the contribution from Francesca Vanelli, Besmira Dyca, and Paul Rabé. The authors discuss how water basins experience significant pressure from urban growth, tourism, energy, and food demands, exacerbated by the pressing challenges of climate change. In light of these challenges, they explore the potentials for a transboundary water management policy with respect to the Drin River basin. In doing so, the contribution assesses water governance's effectiveness and efficiency, applying a land-water nexus framework to evaluate the extent to which relevant land-based activities are included and effectively monitored. Building on the analysis of various aspects (existing transboundary and national legal frameworks, institutional and financial capacities for data collection, and the presence and enforcement of a land-water nexus vision) the authors point towards the need to understand policy gaps between riparian countries and the need to develop an integrated cross-sectoral framework for resource management as the basis for a better land-water nexus and more sustainable and resilient development.

The contribution from Vesna Garvanlieva Andonova and Marjan Nikolov also focuses on the management of resources, in particular the economic viability of alternatives for lignite-free electricity production in North Macedonia. The authors explain that the usage of coal to produce electricity has become less and less attractive as a consequence of the environmental protocols attached to the EU integration process. On this basis, they argue that this situation will have severe impacts on those regions that host thermal power-plant, that either directly or indirectly employ a high number of people, and that focus on coal to contribute to the regional economic value added.

Finally, in the final contribution of the volume, Maroš Finka, Milan Husár, and Matej Jaško present a number of inspirational lessons from the CENTROPE Initiative, which could stimulate the introduction of more adaptive governance models and mechanisms in the Western Balkan region. CENTROPE is presented as one of the most visible projects that characterised the integration of central and eastern European countries into the EU throughout the second half of the 1990s and the 2000s. CENTROPE sought to develop a governance framework for effective and efficient cooperation in a large transnational area. The contribution explains that, similar to the Western Balkans, the economic and social development of CENTROPE was and still remains uneven, as the initiative did not manage to promote polycentric governance arrangements that could have enabled the effective management of spatial activities in the region.

Through various angles, all the contributions included in this volume touch upon the challenges and pitfalls that characterise the present configuration of territorial governance in the Western

Balkan region and how the region is coping with economic uncertainties and the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors propose a number of ways forward to inspire the introduction of more flexible models and mechanisms that, in turn, could contribute to making the governance of the region more adaptive.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.