Multi-level Governance and Partnership Principle in European Territorial Cooperation:

a Case Study on Interreg Italy-Austria

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Abstract

This master's thesis explores the implementation of multi-level governance (MLG) in European Territorial Cooperation, using the Interreg Italy-Austria program as a case study. The research examines the interactions between regional authorities, national authorities, and EU institutions, and assesses the involvement of non-state actors in the formulation of program policies. Utilizing Piattoni's (2010) conceptual model of MLG, the study evaluates whether these interactions align with multi-level governance theory and the partnership principle. The findings indicate that the Interreg Italy-Austria program exhibits significant decentralization, with regional authorities playing a central role in program management. However, while regions maintain direct communication with the European Commission and have some autonomy over the program's content, their influence on broader EU policies related to European Territorial Cooperation remains limited. Furthermore, the involvement of non-state actors generally lacks impact on the program's policy objectives, except for Local Action Groups implementing Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), which effectively engage non-state actors. The thesis also identifies areas for improvement to better adhere to the partnership principle, including enhancing non-state actors' participation and more broadly adopting successful strategies like CLLD.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Multi-level governance (MLG) has been identified by the European Union institutions as a success factor for the development and implementation of EU policies (Széchy, 2023). According to the EU institutions, this concept entails a coordinated action between the European Union, the Member States, and regional authorities, based on partnership with non-state actors (Committee of the Regions, 2009). At the theoretical level, MLG corresponds to the dispersion of authority and power among different levels of government and non-governmental actors (Piattoni, 2010).

One under-researched policy domain where the multi-level governance mode is applied is the European Territorial Cooperation, commonly known as Interreg. Interreg is a key component of Cohesion Policy that specifically aims to promote cross-border and transnational cooperation between European regions. Through programs funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Interreg aims to promote social and economic cohesion, tackling border obstacles, reducing the relevance of national borders, and ultimately prompting European Integration (Committee of the Regions, 2007; European Structural and Investment Funds, 2024). These programs embody the principles of MLG by involving multiple levels of government as well as non-state actors in their planning, implementation, and evaluation processes.

1.1 Multi-level governance and the partnership principle

The embodiment of the multi-level governance is found in the partnership principle, which is an essential requirement of Cohesion Policy - the EU policy package aimed at enhancing territorial, social, and economic cohesion. It is indeed from the analysis of the partnership principle in the realm of cohesion policy that Marks developed the multi-level governance framework (1993). This principle prescribes that in the formation and implementation of cohesion policy, alongside national governments and the EU itself, sub-national authorities and non-state actors (such as socioeconomic partners and civil society) must also participate (Warleigh, 2006). More specifically, in the regulation for cohesion policy, the EU contends that "*the principle of partnership* is a key feature in the implementation of the Funds, building on the *multi-level governance approach* and ensuring the involvement of regional, local, urban and other public authorities, civil society, economic and social partners and, where appropriate, research organizations and universities" (EU Regulation 1058/2021, recital 8). Among the actors, an essential role is given to sub-national authorities, who are expected to guide the ideation and implementation of funds (Piattoni, 2010).

The partnership principle and multi-level approach have been praised for improving Cohesion Policy effectiveness by strengthening administrative capacity, increasing expertise, and enhancing transparency in decision-making (Bachtler et al., 2017; Dąbrowski, 2014; European Commission 2015; Milio, 2014). Furthermore, the partnership principle helped implement place-based strategies to better target regional needs (European Committee of the Regions, 2021). For these reasons, the EU institutions recognized the partnership principle and the multi-level approach as success factors for the Cohesion Policy and advocated for them in the current debate on the policy cycle post-2027 (Széchy, 2023).

1.2 Critique of multi-level governance

Despite the positive discourse around multi-level governance and the partnership principle, its implementation presented problems regarding lack of participation or mere involvement without constituting true governance (Bache, 2008).

The EU expects regional authorities and non-state actors to be involved and shape Cohesion Policy in a multi-level system along with national authorities and the EU institutions. At the theoretical level, this is translated into a system where authority should be dispersed among these actors (Zahariadis, 2017). In particular, for Marks, the partnership principle within the multi-level system should offer opportunities for subnational actors to challenge the state executive and to build a direct relationship with supranational actors (Marks, 1996). Non-state actors should have a direct involvement in the policy-making, creating non-hierarchical networks with the institutions national, regional or the EU itself (Bache, 2008).

However, scholars argue that a clear distinction must be made between the mere "participation" of regions and non-state actors and actual "governance," or between multi-level "involvement" and true multi-level "governance", as participation in the process does not always translate into meaningful influence over policy outcomes (Bache, 2008, p.10; Blom-Hansen, 2005, p. 628). Central governments have indeed often resisted the devolution of any real decision-making power to regional actors, and even more to representatives of civil society (Anderson, 1990; Bache, 1999; Bache & Flinders, 2004; Piattoni, 2010; Schakel, 2020). Tortola adds that the role of non-state actors, whose presence defines the multi-level *governance* feature, instead of a multi-level *government*, is not as influential, if not negligible (2017).

Also reports from the EU institutions support this criticism. Recent reports of the Committee of the Regions report that socioeconomic partners and civil society organizations in Operational Programs

of Cohesion Policy are still underrepresented (European Committee of the Regions, 2021). Finally, the High-Level Group of the European Commission, in the realm of the next Cohesion Policy Post-2027, advocated for the strengthening of the partnership principle and the multi-level governance as it identified a lack of coordination among levels of government and lack of non-state actors' engagement.

The limited impact of sub-state actors and non-state actors was also registered in other policy domains that utilize multi-level systems. For example, in environmental policy, the central government has historically played a much more influential role than subnational actors, and environmental groups have had more a role of oversight than actual policy participation (Fairbraiss & Jordan, 2004). The centrality of the national government compared to regional governments is also evident in economic and social policies (Jessop, 2002). For instance, in higher education policy, the inclusion of subnational actors and civil society organizations in policy-making remains inconsistent (Piattoni, 2010).

1.3 Knowledge gap

Although these issues regarding the limited involvement of regional authorities and, especially, non-state actors have occurred in various policy domains—including Cohesion Policy, environmental, social and economic, and higher education policies—few studies have analyzed whether these problems also exist within Interreg. Interreg requires the partnership principle and its MLG approach to function not only within countries but also across national borders, adding layers of complexity and potential challenges. Cross-border cooperation features persisting barriers related to administrative, legal, linguistic, cultural, and physical obstacles that can hinder the effective implementation of the coordination advocated by the partnership principle and the multi-level governance approach (Medeiros, 2018). Unlike Cohesion Policy, which is supported by multiple funds (European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund Plus, Cohesion Fund, Just Transition Fund) Interreg is based solely on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Consequently, Interreg's specific outcomes and implementation nuances cannot be fully determined by the broader assumptions applied to the entire Cohesion Policy framework, or even less, to other policy domains that present an MLG system.

Thus, the implications of the multi-level governance in the Interreg programs are still under-researched. We do not know whether the actors in the partnership principle are involved in the formulation and implementation of the Interreg programs, whether some actors are marginalized,

whether regions' or non-state actors' engagement or specific processes have been problematic, which actors play the most important roles, and most importantly, whether we are dealing with proper multi-level *governance* or mere multi-level *involvement*.

1.4 Research question

The previous discussion leads to the research question of this master thesis:

"How is multi-level governance being implemented in Interreg?"

In this research, I focus on the implementation of multi-level governance (MLG) in Interreg. Specifically, it examines how MLG operates in practice by analyzing the involvement of different levels of government and non-state actors in the formulation and implementation of the program priorities and their influence on policy objectives. Furthermore, by analyzing multi-level governance, I can assess also the respect for the partnership principle, which prescribes regional and non-state actors' involvement.

To respond to this research question, I employ the MLG theory and the conceptual model of MLG provided by Piattoni (2010) to structure my analysis. The MLG theoretical model provided by Piattoni (2010) helps uncover the interactions between all the components of MLG by highlighting the relationships between and within the government levels and their relationship with non-state actors. In particular, Piattoni (2010) developed a model based on axes and planes that can uncover the interactions between the State, the regions, the supranational institutions and the society. By utilizing this framework, I aim to uncover if there are problems regarding participation and if some actors are more empowered than others. This analysis will help understand whether the EU's expectations regarding respect of the partnership principle are met, and verify whether the expectations of MLG theory are fulfilled.

My focus will be specifically on the one hand on the autonomy of regional authorities from the State and their relationship with EU institutions, while on the other on the involvement of non-state actors. These two groups are central to the partnership principle and represent key areas of contention within multi-level governance theory, as regional authorities are said to still strongly rely on central governments for the implementation of EU policies that present an MLG system, while non-state actors' involvement is considered only superficial and not influential in the policy outcomes. Consequently, I have developed three sub-questions to address these aspects.

1- What is the relationship between the regional authorities and the national authorities in Interreg programs?
2- What is the relationship between the regional authorities and the EU institutions in Interreg programs?
3- How are non-state actors involved in Interreg programs?

The first two sub-questions focus both on regional involvement. The first analyzes the relationship of the regions with the national authorities, while the second focuses on the relationship between regions and EU institutions. These sub-questions help clarify whether the regions contributed to the policy objectives in an autonomous way from the state and with direct interaction with the EU institutions.

The third sub-question helps us understand whether the non-state actors were merely consulted without shaping the Interreg policies, or if they contributed to the Interreg policy-making to the extent that their contribution was visible in the policy objectives, constituting the *governance* feature of the multi-level system and respecting the partnership principle.

1.5 Case: Interreg program Italy-Austria

To prioritize an in-depth analysis, the research is a single case study, focusing on the Interreg program Italy-Austria. This case can, on the one hand, shed light on the broader case of the Interreg programs, and on the other hand, also allow the analysis of its peculiarities. The case of the Interreg Italy-Austria program involves Italy, a regional state, and Austria - a federal state; therefore, I expect regions to influence policy objectives and to be to a large extent independent from national authorities in the negotiations with the EU institutions. Additionally, it is the only Interreg program that prioritizes the bottom-up approach of the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) area. In this area, local entities known as Local Action Groups (LAGs) from Austria and Italy (officially private entities managing public funds) collaborate to implement local projects in close contact with the territory. This makes it an interesting case for uncovering how non-state actors' involvement was implemented, addressing one of the main criticisms of the partnership principle and multi-level governance, and exploring how the CLLD approach can offer new solutions.

1.6 Academic relevance

Multi-level governance is at the center of an academic debate, as empirical evidence often reveals mismatches regarding the role of non-state actors and the actual empowerment of regions compared

to the authority retained by the state in supranational relations. This research can contribute to the existing literature in several ways.

Firstly, through the analysis of the case Interreg Italy-Austria, I aim to assess if Interreg presents the same problems of MLG examined in Cohesion Policy or other policy domains (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Piattoni, 2010). Although there has been research on the application of multi-level governance and the partnership principle on Cohesion Policy, the specifics of this approach to Interreg programs have been little explored, and there is also no research on the Italy-Austria case. Further research in this area may lead to different outcomes than previous studies on multi-level governance, which could reveal both the weaknesses and strengths of the MLG theory, specifically in relation to the Italy-Austria program as well as Interreg programs in general.

Secondly, the assessment of the implementation of the partnership principle within a multi-level governance system can also contribute to the debate around the democratic implications of multi-level governance. In particular, according to Marks and Hooghe (2001), MLG systems are considered normatively superior on democratic grounds because they can reflect the preferences of a large group of state and non-state actors, but other scholars counterargue that such involvement does not lead to actual policy outcomes, and that the processes are still technocratic (Blom-Hansen, 2005; Börzel, 2020; Schmidt, 2013).

Thirdly, the cross-border feature of Interreg could enrich the academic discussion of MLG as a theory of European Integration from a new perspective. Unlike traditional approaches that primarily focus on state-to-state interactions or the relationship between member states and EU institutions, this cross-border cooperation underscores the importance of regional and local actors in fostering European integration.

1.7 Societal relevance

This question can hold societal relevance given the importance that EU institutions place on the multi-level governance approach and the partnership principle.

Interreg and Cohesion Policy are now under debate for the next programming period, 2028-2034. Therefore, it becomes currently relevant to understand whether Interreg presents good practices to emulate or pitfalls to avoid in the implementation of multi-level governance and the partnership principle. In particular, it is relevant to understand whether regional authorities and non-state actors were involved in the formulation and implementation of Interreg programs to determine if the

political priorities reflect the socioeconomic needs of the regional area under study. My research on Interreg Italy-Austria can identify potential weaknesses in the application of MLG approach and stakeholder engagement within the program. By addressing these limitations, recommendations can be made to improve inclusivity and enhance the alignment between program priorities and regional needs. These insights can not only strengthen the Interreg Italy-Austria program but also offer guidance for improving other Interreg programs.

Furthermore, the European Commission expects multi-level governance and the partnership principle to be implemented through place-based strategies (European Commission, 2024a). This is particularly relevant given that Interreg Italy-Austria is the only program that prioritizes the bottom-up approach of Community Led Local Development, a model that prompts active engagement from local stakeholders. This model serves as a practical example of how multi-level governance can be effectively applied to ensure that local actors have a direct impact on policy outcomes, reinforcing the broader objectives of the EU's Cohesion Policy.

1.8 Structure

The first chapter served as an introduction to this master's thesis. The second chapter provides a literature review of the partnership principle, and multi-level governance as a concept and as a theory. The third chapter provides the theoretical basis for the empirical research, stemming from the MLG theory and presenting Piattoni's conceptual model (2010). The fourth chapter delves into the methodology. It discusses the case selection of Interreg Italy-Austria, the methods, the data collection and the quality criteria. The fifth chapter focuses on empirical research, analyzing how multi-level governance is applied in the Interreg program under investigation by using Piattoni's conceptual model (2010). Finally, the conclusion responds to the main research question, summarizes the results of the investigation, and provides recommendations for the Interreg programs.

Chapter 2 – Literature review and research context: Partnership principle and multi-level governance

2.1 Evolution of the partnership principle within Cohesion Policy

The embodiment of the multi-level governance approach is the partnership principle (Milio, 2014). This principle was introduced in the 1988 reform of the structural funds, the financial instruments of the Cohesion Policy aimed at fostering regional development. This reform prescribed that the EU's use of the funds had to involve close cooperation between the European Commission, the Member States, and the competent national, regional, and local authorities (Piattoni & Polverari, 2016). Furthermore, it introduced the Monitoring Committee of the Operational Programs of Cohesion Policy which embodies the partnership principle because it reunites the EU, national, regional, and local authorities to both monitor the progress in the implementation of the Funds and propose improvements in the system (Piattoni, 2010).

Over time the partnership became horizontally more inclusive by involving non-state actors (Milio, 2014). In particular, the 1993 reform extended the partnership from subnational authorities to economic and social partners, and later the 2007 reform included environmental partners, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, and organizations that promote equality between men and women (Piattoni & Polverari, 2016). Such inclusion of partners must concern all the stages of the development, implementation, and evaluation of the program. The non-state actors became more or less relevant in both the implementation of projects and in the Monitoring Committees (Cartwright & Batory, 2012; Lackowska-Madurowicz & Swianiewicz, 2013; Piattoni, 2010; Piattoni & Polverari, 2016). In a few words, the initial inclusion of multiple government layers of the EU Commission, the Member States, and regional and local authorities established the vertical relations of the multi-level EU system, while the relationship between public and non-state actors constituted the horizontal ones.

However, the horizontal and vertical negotiations among partners faced implementation challenges. Therefore, in 2014, Partnership Agreements and the Code of Conduct of Partnership were introduced to ensure the inclusion of all partners. In particular, the Partnership Agreements are stipulated between each Member State and the EU Commission to establish priorities and methods for using the Cohesion Funds, while the Code of Partnership is a document that sets out the

principles and rules to ensure inclusive and transparent participation of all relevant partners in the preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs (Piattoni & Polverari, 2016).

The interesting development of this extended inclusion of partners since 1988 is that public authorities, at least formally, changed their role from main decision makers of the Cohesion Policy to coordinators (Dąbrowski, 2014). This approach moreover not only regards the management of the Operational Programs, but also the development of projects themselves where program managers are no longer only public authorities. All of these developments in governance, initiated by the reforms of Cohesion Policy, also impacted Interreg programs, of which they are a part.

2.2 The current legal framework of the partnership principle and MLG within Cohesion Policy

In the policy cycle 2021-2027 of Cohesion Policy, of which Interreg programs are part, the legal framework of the partnership principle can be found in the regulations regarding the Cohesion Funds - Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 and Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 - and more specifically in the one dedicated to European Territorial Cooperation – Regulation (EU) 2021/1059. The Regulation (EU) 1058/2021 in recital 8 considers the partnership principle as the key feature of the implementation of the funds and prescribes that it must be applied at all stages of the program: preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. More specifically, according to Article 8 of the Regulation (EU) 1060/2021, partners must include (in the case of Interreg coming from all the participating countries):

> (a) regional, local, urban, and other public authorities;
>
> (b) economic and social partners;
>
> (c) relevant bodies representing civil society, such as environmental partners, non-governmental organizations, and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, fundamental rights, rights of persons with disabilities, gender equality, and non-discrimination;
>
> (d) research organizations and universities, where appropriate.

Moreover, the article states that the partnership principle must operate by the multi-level governance principle and the bottom-up approach. This already exemplifies by law the close relationship between the partnership principle and multi-level governance. This connection is further highlighted in recital 4 of Regulation (EU) 1059/2021 where it is made explicit that the

partnership principle and the multi-level governance approach must also be applied to cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation.

2.3 The EU institutions' views on the MLG and partnership principle

For the next Cohesion Policy program post-2027, which includes also Interreg programs, the EU institutions agree on keeping the partnership principle and the related multi-level governance approach as keys for successful policies (Széchy, 2023). According to the European Commission, effective partnerships engaging local stakeholders increase ownership of European policies. In particular, Commissioner Ferreira from DG REGIO[1] in April 2023 at the conference for the future of Cohesion Policy recognized the partnership principle and the multi-level governance as major success factors (Széchy, 2023).

In the ninth report on economic, social, and territorial cohesion, the European Commission (EC) advocated for partnership, multilevel governance, and empowerment of stakeholders. It reasoned that people on the ground know better their territorial needs and therefore should be involved in the decision and policymaking. The aim is to target the needs of economic and social partners and citizens, in line with EU priorities (European Commission, 2024b). The EC also acknowledged that the current policy cycle 2021-2027 strengthened the partnership principle through the involvement of regional and local actors, civil society, and social partners in the program development and through actions that promoted territorial delivery models, such as Community-led local development, which is a model that prompts local partnership and bottom-up approaches. (European Commission, 2024a). Furthermore, the report advocated for better sub-national authorities' involvement and territorial multi-level governance mechanisms.

The European Parliament (EP) calls for the application of the principle in all stages of EU Cohesion Policy (programming and implementation) and for close cooperation of all relevant stakeholders (regional, local authorities, NGOs), too. The EP believes that effective partnerships and place-based strategies by engaging local stakeholders increase ownership of European policies (Széchy, 2023). Finally, the Committee of the Regions advocates as well for the development of policies based on multi-level governance, and the application of the partnership principle (Committee of the Regions, 2023).

[1] Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, which is a department of the European Commission responsible for the European Union's policies on regional development, urban development, and cohesion

However, as briefly discussed in the introduction, the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy of the European Commission for Cohesion Policy Post-27 acknowledged in its report in February 2024 some governance challenges and advocated for strengthening the multilevel approach and the partnership principle (European Commission, 2024a). The High-Level Group highlights the lack of coordination and lack of stakeholder engagement. To address these issues, the report suggests that governance structures should strengthen their shared management system based on the multilevel governance and partnership principle. Concerning horizontal relations, the High-Level Group advocated for a robust multilevel governance system that strengthens horizontal partnerships and ensures the meaningful involvement of a broad range of stakeholders in policy programming and implementation. The report highlights the importance of participatory approaches to enhance stakeholder awareness and engagement, including civil society, the private sector, and local communities in decision-making processes through public consultation and inclusive policy dialogue. Concerning vertical relations, the document underscores the necessity of improving vertical coordination among EU, national, and regional actors through clear communication channels, integrated policy frameworks, and joint decision-making mechanisms.

Since Interreg belongs to the Cohesion Policy, the opinions of the EU institutions and recommendations made in the ninth cohesion report and the High-Level Group report of the EU Commission become highly relevant for this master's thesis. This discussion helps understand what the direction of the EU institutions regarding the partnership principle and the multi-level governance approach is besides the EU regulations. It furthermore highlights modes and models to ensure its application. One of these is the CLLD, an approach that within the Interreg Programs, only Interreg Italy-Austria is implementing. This model can offer an alternative approach to implementing the partnership principle, potentially leading to genuine stakeholder involvement and collaboration.

2.4 The multi-level governance theory literature

The introduction of the partnership principle in the 1988 reform of the Structural Funds, which mandated collaboration across various levels of authority, laid the foundation for the concept of multi-level governance. This governance system today postulates the dispersion of authority in policymaking and policy implementation, where multiple state and non-state actors participate at multiple levels, creating a system of interdependence (Zahariadis, 2017).

Gary Marks first used the term "multi-level governance" to describe the developments within Cohesion Policy (1993). Since then, the concept has evolved to encompass broader EU decision-making processes, drawing from both neo-functionalist insights and German federalism concepts (Bache et al., 2022). As mentioned in the introduction, the partnership principle and its multi-level relations prompted scholars to develop a theoretical framework that could describe the vertical and (later) horizontal relations of collaboration between different levels of government and non-state actors. This relationship between the subnational authorities, especially the regions, and the EU institutions was used not only by Hooghe and Marks to describe MLG as an analytical framework, but also as a new theory for European Integration, drawing from neo-functionalism, but as an alternative to it and the much different intergovernmentalism, where the focus is not anymore on the states but rather on subnational authorities (2001). The dispersion of authority typical of the multi-level governance system, according to Marks and Hooghe (2001), is within and beyond national states. In particular, Marks argues that the partnership principle challenges the national state authority, by allowing the regional level to build a more direct relationship with the supranational level, namely the EU institutions, without needing to pass through the national authorities (Marks, 1993). According to Piattoni, the implementation of Structural Funds pushes for the creation of a third level, the regions, after the EU and the Member States, even in states where administrative regions do not exist (2010).

As discussed in the evolution of the partnership principle (paragraph 2.1), the following reforms enlarged the partnership also to non-state actors, which led to the redefinition of the theory as well. In particular, according to Piattoni, a multi-level system must include non-state actors (2010). There is therefore a nest of vertical and horizontal relations where autonomous actors other than the Member States, and not only governmental, have decision and policy-making powers (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Piattoni, 2010; Warleigh, 2006).

The initial focus of the MLG theory indeed neglected the involvement of non-state actors in policymaking, but after the inclusive reforms regarding partnership and some criticism for not addressing their increasing role, Marks and Hooghe elaborated two Types of Multi-level governance that could better describe not only the vertical relations but also the horizontal ones (Börzel & Risse, 2003). These types outline the distinct characteristics of governance arrangements and how they interact with various levels of government and other actors: Type I MLG and Type II MLG. Type I MLG involves stable, hierarchical, and territorially defined jurisdictions such as federal systems or decentralized states. These structures have clear boundaries and well-defined authority levels, focusing on broad, general-purpose governance (Bache et al., 2022; Hooghe & Marks,

2001). Type II MLG is characterized by flexible, overlapping, and task-specific jurisdictions that transcend traditional territorial limits. This type includes multiple governance levels that are specialized in specific issues or functions, often involving various actors from public, private, and non-governmental sectors (Bache et al., 2022; Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Together, these types highlight the diversity in governance arrangements, where Type I emphasizes territorial integration and coordination, while Type II focuses on functional problem-solving and networked governance. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the two types are not mutually exclusive, therefore a multi-level can present Type I MLG forms, and in parallel Type II forms (Piattoni, 2010).

Piattoni (2010) further highlighted the horizontal and vertical relations of MLG by elaborating a scheme that highlights the relationships between the state, the subnational authorities, the cooperation at the EU level, and society. This scheme will be more thoroughly explained in the theoretical framework chapter, as it will provide the theoretical foundation for guiding this research.

Critics argue that MLG theory often overlaps with concepts like participation, mobilization, and dialogue, without clearly defining its contributions to governance studies (Piattoni, 2010). According to Bache et al., its practical applicability is limited because it provides a broad but non-specific framework, making it difficult to apply (2022). According to Bache (2012) and Warleigh (2006), MLG theory lacks detailed explanations of how actor networks interact and influence policy outcomes, reducing its explanatory power and failing to provide causal mechanisms. Consequently, some scholars suggest integrating or replacing MLG with other theories like policy networks (Warleigh, 2006), principal-agent theory (Blom-hansen, 2005), Europeanization (Radaelli, 2003, 2006), and network governance (Torfing et al., 2012) to address these limitations.

2.5 Controversial issues of the MLG and the partnership principle within Cohesion Policy

Multi-level governance received several criticisms in its application. Firstly, although the partnership principle should implement the multi-level governance approach, the literature argues that its application prompts more *participation* or *involvement* rather than *governance* (Bache, 2008, p. 10; Blom-Hansen, 2005, p. 628). Secondly and tightly related, scholars argue that MLG overstates the relative power of sub-state actors and non-state actors (Bache, 1998, 1999, 2008, 2012; Bache & Flinders, 2004; Blom-Hansen, 2005; Börzel, 2020; Schakel, 2020; Warleigh, 2006). It is questioned whether regional authorities and non-state actors genuinely have significant influence over policy outcomes and in the decision-making processes, which are typically

dominated by national governments. If on the one hand, MLG facilitates the involvement of regional and local, it does not automatically ensure equal influence among all participants, thereby raising questions about the real power dynamics within these networks (Bache, 1998, 1999).

Concerning the role of regional authorities, scholars have pointed out that, despite the introduction of the partnership principle, Member States are often reluctant to relinquish authority (Anderson, 1990; Bache, 1998; Bache & Flinders, 2004). Furthermore, regions do not influence the policy content or funds allocation of the Cohesion Policy by developing direct relations with supranational institutions as the MLG predicts (Bache, 1998; Schakel, 2020). Nonetheless, research shows that there is a differentiation between the level of autonomy from national authorities in the management of Operational Programs and the level of power of regions vis à vis supranational institutions in Cohesion Policy development. While in the management of Operational Programs, the level of regional autonomy seems to align with the form of the State (federal, regional and centralized), this does not significantly affect their power at the EU level (Leonardi & Nanetti, 2011). For example, German regions, despite their predominant role in the Operational Programs, experienced a partial loss of power due to the Cohesion policy (Thielemann, 1999). German governmental representatives could negotiate directly in Brussels over the allocation and distribution of Structural Funds within Germany without necessarily securing prior consent from the Laender, a deviation from the established domestic arrangements (Piattoni, 2010; Thielemann, 1999).

Regarding the role of non-state actors, whose involvement was also introduced in the context of Cohesion Policy by the partnership principle, there was relevant research regarding their involvement in Monitoring Committees of Operational Programs of Cohesion Policy. Piattoni (2010) reports that within Monitoring Committees the partnership principle is not always fully realized, with some committees including stakeholders without voting rights or insufficient time for them to formulate opinions. Civil society organizations (CSOs) participate less because they are scarcely interested in regional development or when they are, they lack the expertise to gather and process information and give meaningful contributions. In Poland, the participation of social partners remained superficial, and the selection of third-sector representatives was seen more as a façade than genuine participation (Lackowska-Madurowicz & Swianiewicz, 2013). The effectiveness of civil society organizations within these committees varies significantly across different countries, often limited by technical complexities and the mismatch between policy levels and CSO activities (Lackowska-Madurowicz & Swianiewicz, 2013; Piattoni, 2010). CSOs participate less because they are scarcely interested in regional development or when they are, they

lack the expertise to gather and process information and give meaningful contributions (Piattoni, 2010).

The limited impact of sub-state and non-state actors has also been observed in other policy areas featuring a multi-level system, such as environmental policy (Fairbraiss & Jordan, 2004), economic and social policy (Jessop, 2002), and higher education policy (Piattoni, 2010). However, these issues have not been extensively studied concerning Interreg programs. Interreg requires the partnership principle and its multi-level governance approach to function not only within countries but also across national borders, adding layers of complexity and potential challenges. This has led me to explore whether Interreg programs face the same issues identified by scholars in the application of the partnership principle and the related multi-level governance approach. To investigate this, I will conduct an in-depth study of the Italy-Austria Interreg program.

Chapter 3 - Theoretical framework

To address the research question, "*How is multi-level governance being implemented in Interreg*?" I employ the MLG theory and MLG conceptual model developed by Piattoni (2010). According to multi-level governance theory, there is a dispersion of authority among multiple levels of government involved in policy-making - supranational institutions, government and subnational authorities, and non-state actors (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Warleigh, 2006). Thanks to the partnership principle and the multi-level system, regional authorities should be empowered, while non-state actors should be included in policy-making, constituting multi-level *governance*, not only multi-level *government* (Piattoni, 2010).

Although multi-level governance theory has been criticized for being more analytical than explanatory, I argue that this theoretical framework is the most suitable for representing the overall functioning of Interreg in the European governance system. In particular, it highlights who the main actors of the multi-level system are (supranational institutions, national authorities, regional authorities, and non-state actors) and the conditions of what kind of relationship they share. To respond to my research question, I focus on the implementation of MLG and the partnership principle, specifically evaluating the involvement of societal actors and the roles of regions. These aspects are contentious within MLG, as non-state actors are often seen as having limited influence and regions are perceived as largely dependent on national authorities, with minimal impact on shaping EU policies. Furthermore, by applying the MLG theory, I can also address whether the EU expectations regarding the respect of the partnership principle, which requires the involvement of regional authorities and non-state actors, are fulfilled.

More specifically, I chose to apply the conceptual model of multi-level governance developed by Piattoni (2010), shown on Figure 1. This model facilitates the analysis of variations in multi-level governance concerning the relationships between regions, EU institutions, Member states and society. Nonetheless, Piattoni's model defines frames of analysis but does not provide indicators of the level of involvement of the actors. That is why I added the criteria to systemize the relationships between the regions, central government, the European Union, and non-state actors in the operationalization. By integrating this model with the operationalization of the Interreg programs, I can evaluate and analyze the involvement among these actors in policymaking and implementation of the Interreg program.

3.1 The MLG conceptual model by Piattoni (2010)

Piattoni's conceptual framework (2010) of MLG (Figure 1) is useful because it highlights the relationships between the sovereign state (X0), the periphery (X1), the international arena (X2), and society (X3). However, it must be noted that this graph does not represent mathematic functions, as in Piattoni's textbook on multi-level governance, the author does not use any formula.

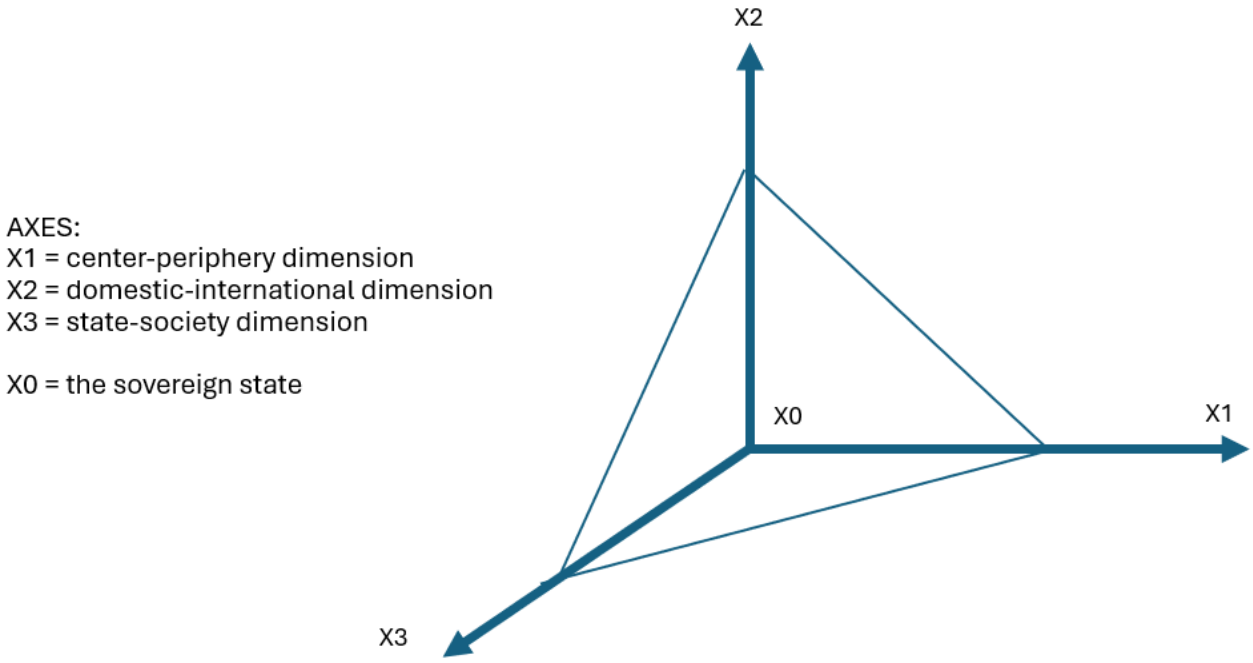

Figure 1. Piattoni's conceptual model (Piattoni, 2010).

3.1.1 Meaning of the axes

The X1 axis is the center-periphery dimension. It represents the possible movement from a unitary state towards decentralized, devolved, and federal configurations, which resemble the Type I of MLG. Type I MLG is characterized by stable, hierarchical levels of governance, such as national, regional, and local governments, with clear, non-overlapping jurisdictions (Bache et al., 2022; Piattoni, 2010). The X1 axis refers therefore to the formal power distribution between the central authority and peripheral (subnational) entities, including regions. As we move outward on the axis, the degree of decentralization and autonomy of the subnational entities increases, showing a progression from unitary states to federal, regional, or highly devolved systems. This means that the central authority retains less direct control, and regions or local governments gain more power to make decisions independently (high X1)(Piattoni, 2010).

The X2 axis indicates the possible movement from autonomous states towards structured modes of international cooperation and regulation. The movement upward on the axis X2 represents a shift from a purely autonomous state to one increasingly integrated into international regimes and subject to international regulations and cooperation mechanisms. This axis highlights how states interact with each other on the global stage and how their autonomy becomes consequently limited. As we move upward on the X2 axis (high X2), states participate more in international organizations such as the European Union, or the World Trade Organization, and adhere to international agreements. This integration reflects states' willingness to share part of their sovereignty and collaborate on global issues which often lead to harmonized policies and collective decision-making at the international level. In short, the state limits its authority through international cooperation (Piattoni, 2010).

The X3 axis portrays the possibility in the governance system of increasing involvement of stakeholders belonging to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities, Chambers of Commerce, labour unions, third-sector organizations, and civil society organizations (CSOs). The developments on this axis suggest that the system is not merely multi-level *government* but multi-level *governance*, where a wider array of actors participates in decision-making and implementation processes. Moving along on this axis represents a shift from a clear distinction between state and society towards greater involvement and integration of NGOs and CSOs in decision-making processes, policy implementation, and governance arrangements (Piattoni, 2010). This development reflects the principles of Type II MLG, which is characterized by flexible, overlapping jurisdictions and the involvement of a diverse array of actors operating across different levels and sectors (Bache et al., 2022; Piattoni, 2010).

According to MLG theory, there should be a simultaneous movement on the three axes (Piattoni, 2010), which means that the state power would be re-scaled through a more international society, towards more devolved systems and by including more actors such as societal actors (Jessop, 2013; Medeiros, 2018). These developments can be represented on the X1 (center-periphery), X2 (domestic-international), and X3 axes (state-society), respectively.

3.1.2 Meaning of the planes

By linking the axes X1, X2, and X3, Piattoni (2010) created planes that illustrate how different kinds of governance—such as the decentralization of power (X1), international cooperation (X2), and the involvement of society (X3)—intersect and interact. It is important to note that while Piattoni explains the movements on the axes, she does not provide an explanation for the

movements on the planes. The axes help us understand the relevance of the actors – subnational authorities, international institutions and society - as they move away from X0 (the state), whereas the planes identify "areas of movement" where different kinds of multi-level governance (MLG) can occur.

The X1X2 plane is the intersection of the X1 axis, which corresponds to decentralization, and the X2 axis, which corresponds to the involvement in international or European cooperation. Subnational authorities can collaborate in the international arena overcoming national borders and interacting with supranational institutions such as the European Union. According to MLG theory, on this plane, there is an expectation of increasing subnational mobilization, namely an increased regional involvement in EU-level policy-making (Piattoni, 2010). According to this proposition, regions will leverage their position to interact directly with EU institutions, which may reduce their reliance on national governments. This reflects a shift towards more autonomy for regional authorities and their enhanced capability to shape policies directly with the EU.

The X2X3 plane represents interactions between domestic and international actors, including non-state entities such as NGOs and civil society organizations. It is the intersection of the X2 axis, namely the involvement in the international arena, and the X3 axis, namely the involvement of civil society in shaping policies. The plane highlights that society can collaborate in the international arena overcoming borders and with the EU. According to MLG theory, on this plane, there is an expectation of increased activism and influence of transnational social movements and advocacy coalitions in EU policy-making (Piattoni, 2010). Following this reasoning, the EU is expected to provide new opportunities for these groups, facilitating their participation in governance processes beyond national borders, and challenging the traditional state-centric approach. It indicates an opportunity for a multi-level governance form where non-state actors can exert influence in international and EU-level decision-making.

The X1X3 plane represents the dynamics between various levels of government and non-state actors within a country. This plane intersects the X1 axis, thus the decentralization of government, and X3 axis, the involvement of society. It represents the involvement of non-state actors from the decentralized levels of government such as regions. According to MLG theory, on this plane, there is an expectation that regional and local governments increasingly involve societal actors in governance processes (Piattoni, 2010). This means that subnational authorities are expected to work closely with non-state actors, such as civil society organizations, and socioeconomic

representatives. This interaction can ensure that policies reflect local needs and priorities, demonstrating an increased integration of non-state actors' interests into regional governance.

3.2 Application, expectations and operationalization of the MLG conceptual model to Interreg programs

To address the research question and sub-questions, I applied Piattoni's conceptual model by analyzing the involvement of regions and non-state actors in the context of Interreg. Given that Interreg programs are programs of cooperation between regions, I focused on the axis and the planes that regard the regions, which are in the context of Interreg the linchpin between vertical and horizontal relations of the multi-level system and the application of the partnership principle. Therefore, the main focus will be on the X1 axis and the adjacent planes, X1X2 (periphery-international) and X1X3 (periphery-society). To make operationalizable the model applied to Interreg, I renamed the axis and the planes according to the actors relevant to the sub-questions: the state, the EU, regions, and non-state actors, as shown in Figure 2.

The first dimension to be analyzed is the X1 axis. This means that first I will assess how regions are involved following the decentralization and secondly, considering these results, I will consider what is their relationship with society and in international cooperation, namely in this specific case the European Union.

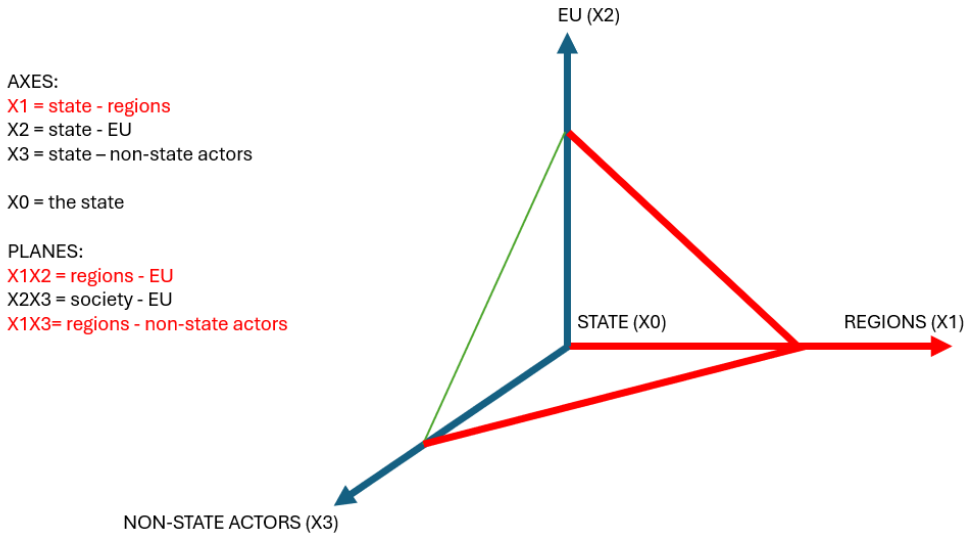

Figure 2. Own elaboration of Piattoni's conceptual framework (Piattoni, 2010)

X1 Axis: Regions-State

To operationalize the first sub-question, "*What is the relationship between the regional authorities and the national authorities in Interreg programs*?", I will analyze the X1 axis to assess

decentralization. This includes the extent of decentralization from national authorities to regions in Interreg programs, as well as the internal distribution of responsibilities within the regional administrations participating in the program.

By applying MLG theory, I expect to see significant decentralization in the Interreg programs, meaning a high level of regional involvement and autonomy in the formulation and management of the Interreg program. The expectation is that national authorities involved in the Interreg program will devolve power and autonomy to the regions. This would be demonstrated by regional authorities having control over the planning and implementation of the Interreg programs. To evaluate decentralization in the X1 axis, I will analyze the structure of the Interreg program and the formal roles assigned to the state and regions. Through information obtained from interviews, I will assess the actual autonomy of regional authorities from the state in making key decisions, and the weight of regional authorities' opinions in final decisions.

Specifically, to assess the fulfilment of these expectations, I will verify:

1. the formal roles of regional and national authorities;
2. the actual involvement of regional and national authorities (in the formulation and implementation of the program);
3. the level of autonomy that regions have in the decision-making process and their dependence on national authorities' decisions.

X1X2 Plane: Regions - European Union Institutions

To operationalize the second sub-question "*What is the relationship between regional authorities and the EU institutions in Interreg programs?"*, I will analyze on the X1X2 plane the relationship between regions and supranational actors, such as the European Union, which sets the objectives for Cohesion Policy, of which Interreg is a part. In this case, I will analyze the relationship between EU institutions (X2 axis), which set the general policy framework for Interreg funds, and the regions involved in the Interreg programs. Since X2 represents the limitation of national authority due to international cooperation, the analysis on the X1X2 plane must take into account the constraints the EU may impose on regional policies in terms of requirements and outcomes. These requirements include the political objectives set by EU regulations on Interreg and the broader Cohesion Policy (of which Interreg is part), as well as any additional requests from the European Commission during program formulation and monitoring.

By applying MLG theory, I expect to find direct cooperation between regional authorities and EU institutions in setting the political objectives for Interreg programs without going through national authorities. According to MLG theory, regions involved in the Interreg program should be able to engage directly with the European Commission without national-level mediation and influence Interreg policy in terms of choosing political objectives and distributing funds. In the context of Interreg programs, this can be operationalized in two different ways: one specific to negotiations concerning the individual program, and the other concerning negotiations that impact the overall Interreg policy.

Specifically, to assess the fulfillment of these expectations, I will verify:

1. the regions' negotiating capacity with the European Commission regarding the content of the specific Interreg operational program without national intermediation (in my research, the Interreg Italy-Austria program);
2. the regions' ability to proactively influence EU policies in defining the overall political objectives and funding set for the overall Interreg policy framework (also known as European Territorial Cooperation).

X1X3 Plane: Regions – Non-State Actors

To operationalize the sub-question "*How are non-state actors involved in Interreg programs*?", I will analyze the relationship between regions and non-state actors on the X1X3 plane, verifying compliance with the partnership principle. As outlined in Article 8 of EU Regulation 1060/2021[2], this principle mandates the inclusion of regional and local authorities, as well as non-state actors such as socioeconomic representatives and civil society organizations in policy development. In addition to the non-state actors mentioned in Article 8, I will also include Local Action Groups involved in community-led local development, which represent specific public-private associations relevant to my case study, Italy-Austria.

[2] More specifically, according to Article 8 of the Regulation (EU) 1060/2021, partners must include (in the case of Interreg coming from all the participating countries):
(a) regional, local, urban, and other public authorities;
(b) economic and social partners;
(c) relevant bodies representing civil society, such as environmental partners, non-governmental organizations, and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, fundamental rights, rights of persons with disabilities, gender equality, and non-discrimination;
(d) research organizations and universities, where appropriate.

By applying MLG theory, I expect regional authorities to involve non-state actors in the formulation and implementation of Interreg programs. However, participation alone is not sufficient. To distinguish between mere multi-level *involvement* and true multi-level *governance*, non-state actors should be able to influence decisions and outcomes, demonstrating a strong integration of societal interests into the governance of the Interreg program. The expectation is therefore to achieve more inclusive and participatory governance in decision-making processes through consultations, working groups, or active participation in decision-making forums, ensuring that policy outcomes reflect local needs and priorities, thus enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of the program. This would mean not only the full implementation of the partnership principle but also fulfilling the repeated requests made by European institutions regarding the future of Cohesion Policy for more participatory approaches.

To determine whether MLG is being implemented through the involvement of non-state actors or whether criticisms are justified, I will assess the interview findings according to the following criteria:

1. direct participation of non-state actors, by assessing their inclusion of non-state actors in decision-making forums;
2. indirect participation of non-state actors, by evaluating whether they participate indirectly in program formulation, for example, through involvement in working groups, public consultations, and expert groups;
3. influence on policy outcomes, by assessing the actual impact that non-state actors have on the formulation and management of the Interreg program.

3.4.1 Summary and relation to EU expectations

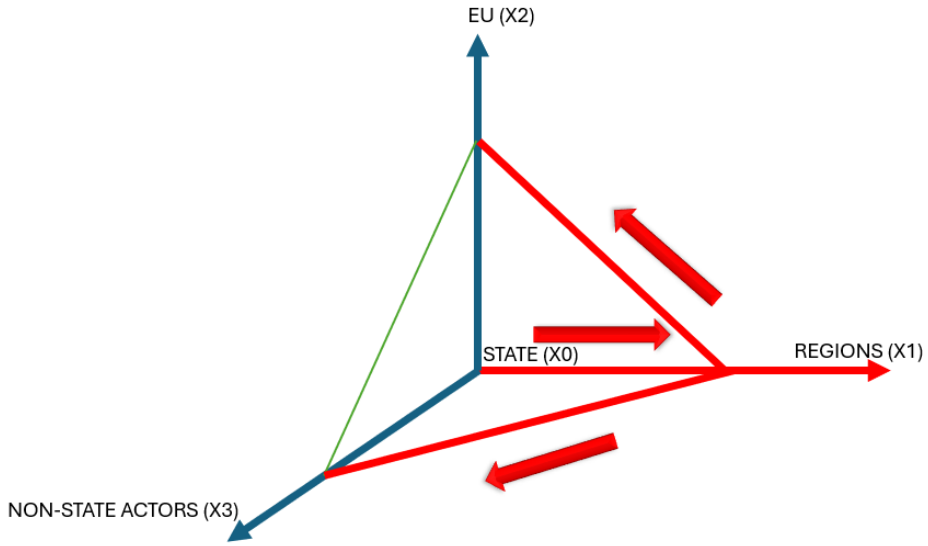

Figure 3. Own elaboration of Piattoni's conceptual framework with arrows (Piattoni, 2010)

The expectations of MLG applied to Interreg programs can be summarized in this image. In Figure 3, I added arrows to represent the MLG expectations. If the arrow from X0 to X1 represents decentralization, the arrow from X1 to X2 represents the subsequent trend towards greater proactivity of the regions towards European institutions. The arrow from X1 to X3 represents the trend, also resulting from decentralization, of regions towards greater involvement of non-state actors.

If the assumptions of MLG theory hold, this would not only confirm the validity of the theory but also demonstrate that the multi-level approach and the related partnership principle advocated by the European Union are being effectively implemented. The EU institutions specifically promote the involvement of regional and local authorities, as well as non-state actors, in close cooperation with both EU institutions and national governments, particularly in the development of Cohesion Policy Programs like Interreg. While the partnership principle and MLG approach promoted by the EU institutions of course do not explicitly address the implications for state authority, existing literature and MLG theory suggest that this process leads to a re-scaling of state power.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

4.1 Case study

My research aims to understand how multi-level governance is being implemented within Interreg. More, specifically, this research aims to explore the interactions between the various actors involved in the Interreg program—EU institutions, the state, subnational authorities, and non-state actors. To address this question, a case study approach is particularly fitting, as it provides an in-depth description of a complex social phenomenon while retaining a real-world perspective (Yin, 2014). Furthermore, case study research, and more specifically single-case studies, is preferred when the research question seeks to understand "how" processes unfold (Yin, 2014), making it well-suited to my research question.

4.1.1 Case selection strategy

The case selection can be analyzed as a "matryoshka" formed by: the Cohesion Policy, Interreg and the Interreg program Italy-Austria.

Multi-level governance was developed by Marks as a concept within the realm of Cohesion Policy and more specifically in the application of the partnership principle. Therefore, Cohesion Policy proves to be an appropriate case to study the implications of the multi-level governance system and the partnership principle. Moreover, most studies of MLG focus on Cohesion Policy offering a rich literature that uncovers problems of participation of non-state actors and lack of regional empowerment that can be compared with the evidence found in the case of Interreg Italy-Austria.

Within Cohesion Policy, I focused on Interreg programs because these specific programs offer new perspectives to the literature about multi-level governance and the partnership principle. On the one hand, Interreg programs belong to the Cohesion Policy, which makes it an appropriate case to study the MLG framework and the application of the partnership principle, but on the other hand, they offer a new perspective that has been little researched. In particular, cross-border cooperation within Interreg adds features of complexity given by the "double" application of the partnership principle and multi-level governance since it involves two countries and therefore double administration system at the regional level, double feedback from the central government level and inclusion of societies from two different countries.

Within Interreg programs, the choice of Interreg Italy-Austria follows two rationales: most-likely case (Rohlfing, 2012) and intrinsic case (Stake, 2005).

A most likely case has a relatively high probability of confirming a theory or proposition (Rohlfing, 2012). Interreg Italy-Austria can be classified as the most likely case because it presents features that make it more likely to implement the MLG theory expectations. This program fosters cross-border cooperation between Austria, a federal state, and Italy, a regional country. This should facilitate high regional autonomy from the state in the management of the program and dealings with the EU institutions. Concerning non-state actors' involvement, the Interreg Program Italy-Austria is the only Interreg program that includes Community Led Local Development (CLLD) as a priority, an approach that aims at involving local stakeholders and that therefore suggests that the expectation of MLG to include non-state actors should be fulfilled. If the expectations derived from MLG theory are not realized in this context, I may infer that they would be less likely to be realized in programs with less favorable conditions.

An intrinsic case is chosen because it is of particular interest in its own right, often due to the unique or unusual features that make it worthy of study (Stake, 2005). Interreg Italy-Austria, by being the only Interreg program that includes the CLLD initiative, makes its study interesting to analyze for this specific feature. This feature offers a distinct perspective on societal involvement in cross-border governance, making the case valuable for its intrinsic interest in understanding how CLLD operates within the Interreg framework.

4.2 Congruence analysis

Congruence analysis is a method that involves drawing inferences from the alignment (or lack thereof) between specific observations and predictions derived from theoretical concepts or abstract frameworks (Blatter & Blume, 2008). This method is particularly suitable when investigating the relationship between abstract theories and concrete evidence (Blatter & Blume, 2008). In this research, I assess whether the expectations derived from MLG theory are met. Given this objective, congruence analysis emerged as the most appropriate approach. Furthermore, as Yin notes, congruence analysis, also known as "pattern matching," is often employed to uncover causal relationships, but it is equally effective in revealing descriptive congruence (2014). This aspect is particularly pertinent to my research, given that MLG theory is primarily analytical and does not provide specific causal mechanisms to verify. In my case, I apply the MLG theory to examine how multi-level governance is implemented within Interreg. To achieve this, I will assess whether the

interactions among actors align with the expectations derived by the theory. Each axis and plane that I am analyzing carries expectations derived from MLG theory, therefore, by checking whether these predictions take place, I am checking whether there was implementation but at the same time providing feedback on the theory. More specifically, this analytical approach helps me understand whether the presented theory is confirmed in my case or if it presents the mismatches that were already highlighted by the literature, such as the controversial role of non-state actors in policymaking. Nonetheless, the MLG governance theory does not provide clear indicators to be operationalized. This means that to test the predictions of the theory, I needed to add indicators in the operationalization that could better define the relationship of the regions with the EU institutions, the national authorities and non-state actors.

4.3 Data collection for the empirical approach

A qualitative researcher is expected to use multiple sources of evidence - at least two - to seek convergence (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2014). This approach is the so-called triangulation, 'the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon' (Denzin, 2017, p. 291). The data collection will be therefore based on three research methods usually used for triangulation in qualitative case study research: participant observation, document analysis, and interviews (Yin, 2014). By using multiple methods, the aim is not only to gain an overall understanding of the MLG and its application to the Interreg program but also to enhance the reliability and credibility of my research.

4.3.1 Document analysis

The first method is document analysis. This method consists of a systematic evaluation of documents to gain understanding and empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). It is particularly useful for producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, program, or organization (Bowen, 2009; (Bowen, 2009; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2014). Documents often used are minutes of meetings, survey data, and program proposals, brochures. To understand how the multi-level governance was implemented, it is essential to find sources that can provide evidence of regional autonomy and non-state actors' involvement which may include records of consultations or decision-making processes. The main documents used for this research are:

- Cooperation agreement of Interreg Italy-Austria VI-A 2021-2027, the document resulted from the policy-making process of the formulation of the program;

- Strategies of Local Action Groups 2021-2027, the documents resulted from the policy-making process of the formulation of the strategies of the fourth priority of the Interreg Program Italy-Austria;
- Minutes of the Task Force that led to the formulation of the Italy-Austria VI-A 2021-2027;
- Surveys conducted by the Managing Authority;
- Program Brochure of the Interreg Program Italy-Austria VI-A 2021-2027.

4.3.2 Interviews

The second method of my research involves conducting interviews, which are often paired with document analysis (Bowen, 2009). They can be structured, semi-structured, and unstructured, "which range from asking each interviewee a predetermined and consistent set of questions, to simply letting the conversation go where the interviewee takes it" (Mosley, 2013, p. 92). For this master's thesis, I used unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Unstructured interviews do not have predefined answers and are often used in combination with participant observation (Mosley, 2013). These interviews allowed for an initial understanding of the roles and structures of the Interreg program from the supranational level to the local level to contextualize them in the multi-level governance system. In the second phase, I used semi-structured interviews to verify the expectations derived from MLG theory. This approach fits well with the research question as semi-structured interviews are "instrumental in creating openings for a narrative to unfold, while also including questions informed by theory" (Galletta, 2013, p. 191). While the main topics were developed according to Piattoni's conceptual model with the indicators I explained in the operationalization, semi-structured interviews allowed me to uncover additional data. In particular, semi-structured interviews have been useful in understanding the role of the actors beyond their formal tasks. For example, the interviews can uncover whether there are additional activities of involvement of non-state actors, possible reasons for participation (or lack thereof), and how the actors (regional authorities, national authorities, EU Commission and non-state actors) impacted the policy outcome.

The sampling of these interviews is purposive. Purposive sampling is a form of non-random sampling that involves selecting the interviewees according to specific characteristics relevant to the object of study (Kapiszewski et al., 2015; Mosley, 2013). In the analysis of Interreg Italy-Austria, the actors are selected based on their relevance to the axes and planes described in Piattoni's conceptual framework and their roles and responsibilities in the program. In total, I organized eighteen interviews. Most interviews were one-to-one, three were dyadic (involving two

participants), and one was a small focus group of three participants (as shown in the appendix). The participants were approached by e-mail and comprehended:

- Regional authorities, which are the Managing Authority of the Program, the Joint Secretariat of the Program, the Regional Coordination Unit employees from each region of the program, and representatives from European Territorial Groupings of Cooperation;
- The rapporteur of European Commission's DG Regio who participated in the formulation and monitoring of the program;
- National authorities, namely the Italian representative from the Department of Cohesion Policies of Italy;
- Representatives of the Local Action Groups of the Community Local Development Strategy, which are associations that involve local authorities and multiple non-state actors.

Furthermore, with particular regard to the Regional Coordination Unit, there was at least one interview for each Region. This allowed me to show similarities or differences between the regional administrations involved in the program. The same applies to the interviews of Local Action Groups.

The majority of interviews were conducted online in Italian, German and English. Virtual interviews have disadvantages compared to face-to-face interactions, as they can lack contextual information and may limit the depth and accuracy of the information provided (Mosley, 2013). Nonetheless, during my internship at the Regional Coordination Unit, I had already met the majority of the individuals that I interviewed in person, especially during a Monitoring Committee meeting. This allowed me to introduce myself and reduce the lack of contextual information. Concerning languages, although conducting interviews not in the native language can also influence the accuracy of the interviews (Mosley, 2013), in this research this did not constitute an issue.

4.3.3 Direct observation

Direct observation is the last data collection option that has been useful for the analysis of the program Interreg Italy-Austria, as I worked for the Regional Coordination Unit in Trieste at the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia between February and May 2024. Direct observation is a qualitative research method where the researcher immerses themselves in the setting they are studying to observe and engage with participants in their natural environment (Yin, 2014). This approach allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the context and the behaviors, interactions, and practices of the participants from an insider's perspective (Yin, 2014). I could

observe how regional authorities related with the main Program Authority in Bolzano and how they communicated with the other regions of the program. Moreover, I participated in the meeting of the Monitoring Committee in May, where I could see how the partnership principle and multi-level governance worked in practice.

4.3.4 Conformity of the data collection to ethical standards

Ensuring ethical standards in research is paramount, particularly in securing informed consent from interview participants (Mosley, 2013). Before starting the interviews, I sought explicit consent from the participants, asking if they were comfortable with recording the sessions and reassuring them that they could withdraw at any moment. This process involved clearly explaining the purpose of the study and how the data would be utilized. The interview list in the appendix does not provide the names of the interviewees but instead lists their roles in the Interreg program (for example, “employee of Regional Coordination Unit”). The participants were aware of and agreed to this arrangement.

Most of the document analysis was conducted using materials available on the official website of Interreg Italy-Austria, which did not require specific permissions. When some documents were not publicly available, I obtained the necessary permissions to access them, ensuring that the information was used exclusively for the research's intended purposes. By following these ethical practices, I aimed to uphold the autonomy and privacy of all participants and data sources involved in my research.

4.4 Data analysis: Qualitative content analysis

In analyzing documents and interviews, I performed a qualitative content analysis using the QDA Miner Lite software for coding. Qualitative Content Analysis systematically describes the meaning of qualitative material by categorizing segments of the data according to a coding framework (Schreier, 2012). Schreier explains that it is common to mix both concept-driven and data-driven strategies in Qualitative Content Analysis (2012) to build categories in the coding scheme. Typically, important topics are identified based on existing knowledge and turned into main categories (concept-driven), while the specifics of these topics are detailed using subcategories derived from the data (data-driven). The main categories are derived from Piattoni’s MLG model and define the relationships I am analyzing: “X1 state-regions”, “X1X2 regions-EU” and “X1X3 regions-nonstate actors”. Then I created the subcategories from the criteria I explained in the operationalization (paragraph 3.2) to verify the expectations derived from MLG theory. Further

subcategories stemmed from the data itself. In the appendix, I attached the coding tree, which reflects this approach.

4.5 Quality criteria: internal and external validity, reliability

Case studies present challenges regarding validity and reliability.

Internal validity in descriptive case studies refers to the accuracy and credibility of the findings within the specific context being studied (Yin, 2014). Although internal validity is more commonly associated with experimental designs, in descriptive case studies, it ensures that the data and interpretations accurately represent the reality of the situation being examined. Yin (2014) emphasizes that internal validity involves rigorously confirming that the findings reflect the true nature of the phenomenon under study, avoiding misinterpretations or biases. In this research, the expert interviews ensure the accuracy of the data and the validity of the findings is further ensured by triangulation of three sources and by asking similar questions to the same interviewees in order to triangulate responses. Therefore, the expected internal validity is high.

External validity pertains to the generalization of findings (Gerring, 2017). This can be very challenging for single case studies, as they focus on a specific context or instance, making it difficult to apply the findings broadly across different settings. Single case studies often provide in-depth insights into a particular phenomenon, but the unique characteristics of the case can limit the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other cases. The case of Interreg Italy-Austria presents these challenges, as every cross-border program presents differences in its governance (Medeiros, 2018). Therefore, although the analysis can provide a detailed understanding of the dynamics within the Interreg Italy-Austria program, the findings may not be directly applicable to other Interreg programs or initiatives due to variations in regional, national, and institutional contexts.

Nonetheless, two considerations can enhance the external validity of this study. Firstly, while the Interreg Italy-Austria program has its peculiarities, it is still governed by the broader framework of Interreg and Cohesion Policy regulations, which standardize key aspects across all such programs such as the respect of the partnership principle and the institution of Managing Authority, Joint Secretariat and of the Monitoring Committee and the ERDF funding. Secondly, the case of Interreg Italy-Austria is particularly well-suited for studying the implementation of multi-level governance due to its favorable starting conditions, such as a state structure that supports regional autonomy and the inclusion of a bottom-up initiative (CLLD) to involve non-state actors. If the anticipated

conditions of multi-level governance are not realized even in this favorable context, it may indicate that these expectations are even less likely to be achieved in other cross-border programs with less favorable conditions.

Reliability refers to the consistency and replicability of research findings, ensuring that similar results would be obtained if the study were repeated under comparable conditions (Yin, 2014). In this research, reliability can be a potential limitation due to the qualitative nature of the study and the interpretive approach required by the MLG framework. The lack of standardized indicators within MLG theory, and the under-researched nature of the topic under study of Interreg, can make it challenging to ensure that findings can be replicated by other researchers.

Nonetheless, to enhance reliability, I have taken several measures to be transparent and systematic throughout the research process. Firstly, I provided some initial criteria to apply the MLG in the operationalization (and re-introduced them at the beginning of each part of the analysis) that could be used again by other researchers to guide the analysis. Secondly, I documented how I collected and triangulated my data through interviews, documents and direct observation. Thirdly, I explained how I conducted the quality content analysis acknowledging that while some codes are theory-driven, others are data-driven.

Chapter 5 - Analysis

This chapter is organized into two main sections. First, I will provide a detailed description of the Interreg Italy-Austria program based on the documents, outlining its essential characteristics, governance structure, and priorities (section 5.1). This contextual information is crucial for evaluating expectations related to decentralization, the interaction between regional authorities and European institutions, and the involvement of non-state actors. Second, I will present the findings from the document analysis and interviews, framed by Piattoni's conceptual model (section 5.2). Specifically, I will analyze the X1 axis, which depicts the relationship between regions and the State; the X1X2 plane, which illustrates the interaction between the regions and EU institutions; and the X1X3 plane, which explores the relationship between non-state actors and regions.

5.1 Research context: Interreg Italy-Austria

5.1.1 Essential characteristics of Interreg Italy-Austria

Interreg Italy-Austria is a cross-border program which aims at promoting projects that foster growth and reduce obstacles in the border area. For the 2021-2027 funding period, Interreg Italy-Austria has €91,339,757, of which approximately 80% comes from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the remaining 20% from national public contributions or project funds (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2022a). With a surface of 50.000 km2 and a population of 5.5 million inhabitants, Interreg Italy-Austria covers six border regions, three in Austria (Land Tirol, Land Salzburg, and Land Kärnten) and three in Italy (Autonomous Region Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Veneto Region, and Autonomous Province of Bolzano[3]) (Figure 4). From here onwards I will refer to the administrations of these six regions as "regional authorities".

[3] The Autonomous Province of Bolzano has the same competencies as a region. Therefore, in this thesis, when referring to the "regional authorities", I also include the Autonomous Province of Bolzano

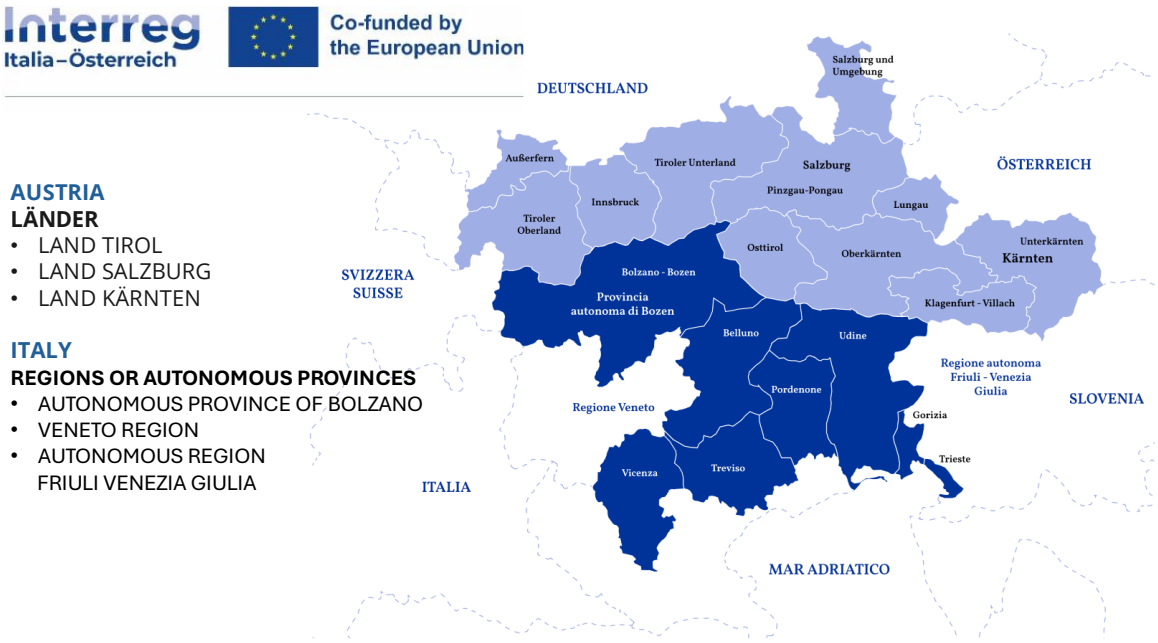

Figure 4. Interreg Italy-Austria chart (own elaboration from Interreg Italy-Austria, 2022a)

A significant aspect of this program relevant to the analysis of state-regions' relationship is the differing governmental structures of the participating countries. Austria is a federal state, granting substantial autonomy to its regions. Italy is a regional state, where regions possess a degree of self-governance, though it is typically less extensive than that found in federal systems. Nonetheless, the program includes two Italian regions with autonomous status: Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG) and the Autonomous Province of Bolzano (South Tyrol), which also host the Managing Authority and the Joint Secretariat, the key management bodies responsible for the program's operation. The form of state of the two countries involved supports the MLG expectation of high regional autonomy from national authorities in both managing the program and selecting and implementing policy objectives.

5.1.2 Management structure of Interreg Italy-Austria

Before analyzing the relationships between the relevant actors in practice, it is important to first clarify their formal roles. This not only aids the reader's understanding but also provides formal evidence of the multi-level governance expectations.

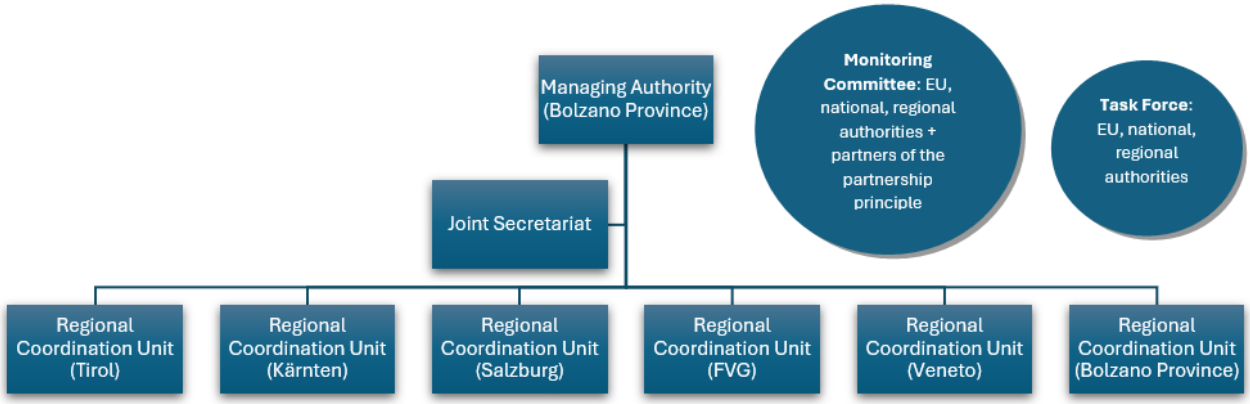

Figure 5. Management structure of Interreg program Italy-Austria, own elaboration (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2022a)

The management structure is composed of the following organs: the Managing Authority, the Joint Secretariat, Regional Coordination Units and the Monitoring Committee illustrated in Figure 5 (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2022a, 2024b). In all these organs the regional authorities have a central role, showing that the Interreg program, at least formally, is highly decentralized. The analysis from the interviews can shed light on the actual independence of these regional authorities from the State in their decisions and the negotiations with EU institutions.

The Managing Authority is responsible for the overall management of the Interreg Italy-Austria. In Interreg Italy-Austria, this authority consists of one regional civil servant of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano. This is the authority that manages the consultations with EU representatives of the European Commission. This role already substantiates the MLG governance expectation of direct contact of regional authorities with the EU institutions without any national intermediate. Nonetheless, only the interviews can explain the outcomes of such negotiation.

The Joint Secretariat consists as well of regional civil servants who are responsible for supporting the other program structures in performing their functions.

The Regional Coordination Units are organs composed of regional civil servants responsible for the six regional territories of the program area. These units assist the Joint Secretariat in disseminating information about the program in their respective territories and ensure the coherence and synergies of the projects with provincial, regional, and national policies. These structures are present only in the Interreg Italy-Austria program and highlight the program's emphasis on regional involvement and autonomy.

The **Monitoring Committee** is the decision-making body of the program. Its tasks include, among others, establishing and approving selection criteria for project proposals, reviewing issues affecting the program's results, and analyzing outcomes during annual meetings. Its composition, which comprehends non-state actors, constitutes the embodiment of the partnership principle and defines the multi-level *governance* nature of Interreg Programs (unlike multi-level *government*). In particular, the Monitoring Committee for the Italy-Austria program includes:

- Regional authorities, such as the Managing Authority, the Joint Secretariat, Regional Coordination Units, and representatives from European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation;
- National authorities from Italy and Austria;
- A representative from the EU Commission, participating as an observer;
- Representatives from local authorities' unions;
- Socioeconomic representatives, including one from the chamber of commerce, one from labour unions, and one from health organizations;
- Environmental authorities;
- Equal opportunities authorities, who, while representing civil society interests, are still authorities.

The **Task Force** is "an informal" body of the management structure established by the Managing Authority to formulate the program and to determine the priorities of the Interreg Program Italy-Austria 2021-2027. The members of the Task Force are the regional authorities, which include the Managing Authority, the Joint Secretariat, and representatives from all the Regional Coordination Units, representatives of the national authorities from Austria and Italy. One representative from the European Commission (DG REGIO) participates in the meetings as an observer.

5.1.3 Interreg Italy-Austria program priorities

The Italy-Austria Interreg program is part of the cohesion policy of the European Union, which publishes five main strategic objectives to choose from. These objectives, defined in Article 4 of Regulation (EU) 1059/2021 are: a more competitive and intelligent Europe; a greener, low-carbon transition to a net-zero emissions economy; a more connected Europe, improving mobility; a more social and inclusive Europe; a Europe closer to citizens, promoting the sustainable and integrated development of all territories.

In line with these objectives, the Interreg Italy-Austria program has identified the following priorities:

1. innovation and business;
2. climate change and biodiversity;
3. sustainable and cultural tourism;
4. Community-Led Local Development (CLLD);
5. reduction of cross-border obstacles;

Among these priorities, the fourth is particularly relevant to this research, as it highlights the involvement of non-state actors.

5.1.4 Community-Led Local Development

The fourth priority differs from the others, particularly in the type of participatory approach. Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) indicates a "bottom-up" method of local development that involves citizens, civil society organizations and socioeconomic partners at the forefront in the management of activities and decision-making processes. Interreg Italy-Austria was a pioneer in testing this type of approach in the 2014-2020 period and it is still the only program in Europe to elect it as a priority in the 2021-2027 period (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2024a).

This model of local development is carried out by Local Action Groups (LAGs), which are private entities, typically associations, or cooperatives, to manage public funds. These groups originated in the realm of the LEADER approach, a key component of EU rural development policy where decisions about funding and project selection are made locally rather than centrally. They are made up of representatives from the public, private, and civil society sectors, such as municipalities, mountain communities, trade unions, tourist consortia, chambers of commerce, environmental and cultural associations, youth organizations, and other entities (Dolomiti Live GAL, n.d.; HeurOpen GAL, n.d.; Terra Raetica GAL, n.d.; Wipptal GAL, n.d.). Sometimes, LAG members also include banks, museums, and educational organizations (Dolomiti Live LAG, nd). LAGs deal with issues that are important for local communities, for example sustainable tourism, social services, cross-border collaboration, climate change adaptation, renewable energy, circular economy (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2022b).

According to EU regulations, CLLD may be implemented in Interreg programs, provided that the relevant Local Action Groups are composed of representatives of public and private local

socioeconomic interests of the two participating countries and no single interest group controls the decision-making (Art. 21, EU Regulation 1059/2021).

In the Interreg Italy-Austria program, LAGs contribute to shaping the fourth priority of the overall Interreg Italy-Austria program and formulate within their CLLD area their development strategies to implement this priority. Each CLLD area, consisting of three or four Local Action Groups that come from both sides of the border, develops its strategy, which must then be approved by the Managing Authority of the Interreg Italy-Austria program (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2022b). Four such strategies were ultimately approved, corresponding to the four CLLD areas: Wipptal, HeurOpen, Dolomiti Live, and Terra Raetica, as shown in Figure 6.

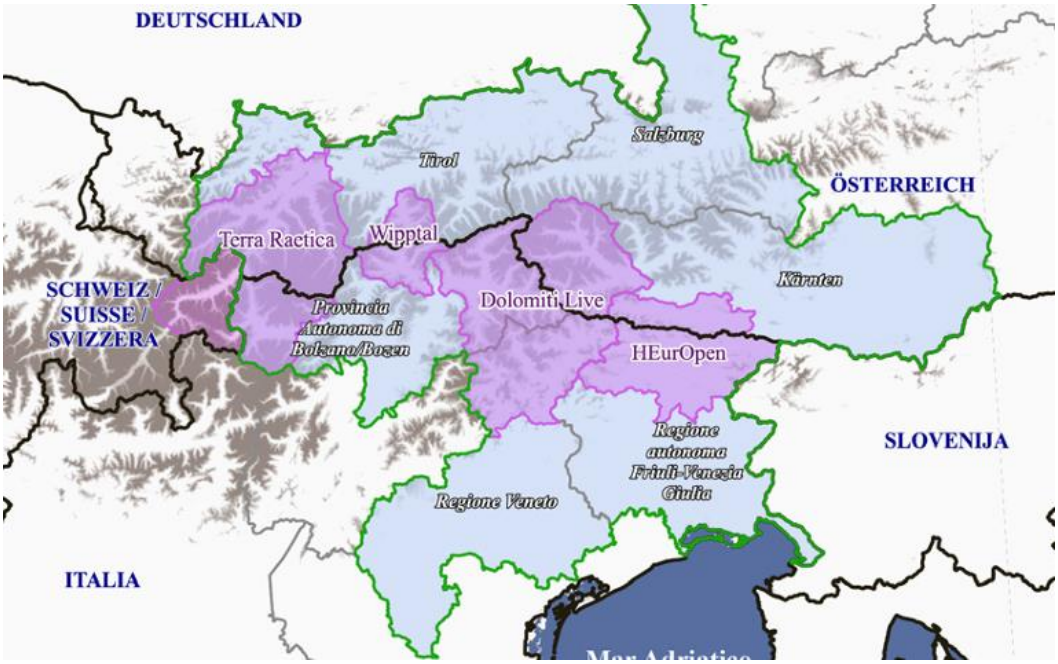

Figure 6. Map of the program area with the CLLD strategies areas in purple (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2022a)

5.2 Relationship between regions and state (X1 axis)

Now that I have provided information about Interreg Italy-Austria, I can apply Piattoni's conceptual model and verify the expectations derived from MLG theory.

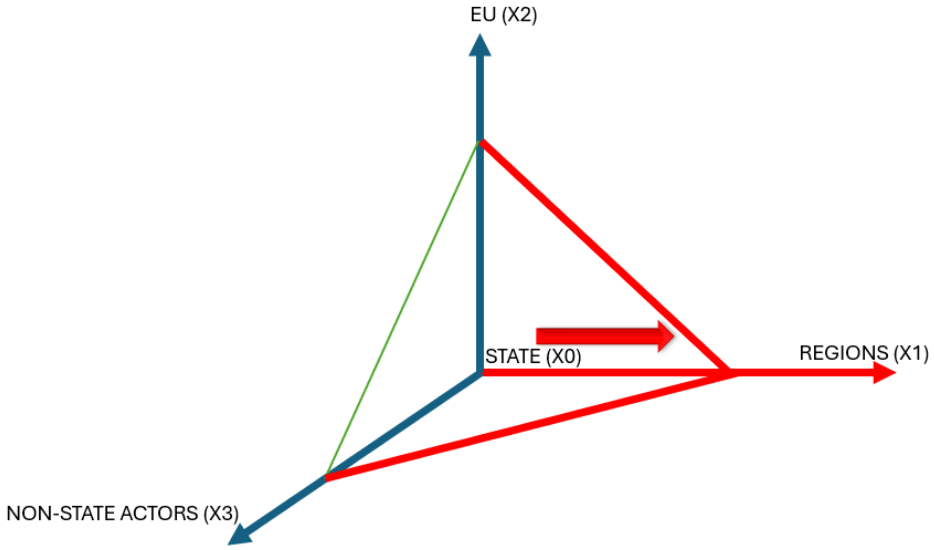

Figure 7. Own elaboration of Piattoni's conceptual model (2010)

Regarding the X1 axis, the expectation is decentralization, as highlighted by the arrow in Figure 7. Decentralization is understood here as the autonomy of regional authorities over national authorities concerning the formulation and management of the Interreg program. To assess the realization of these expectations, I need to verify:

1. the formal roles of the regional authorities and national authorities;
2. the involvement of regional and national authorities in practice (in the formulation of the program during the discussion of the Task Force and in the implementation phase through the participation in Monitoring Committees);
3. the level of autonomy of regions in the decision-making process and their independence from the state's decisions.

This expectation is fulfilled if regional authorities have control over the formulation and implementation of the Interreg programs and can make decisions autonomously without national interference.

5.2.1 Regional and national involvement according to their formal roles

The management structure already highlights the predominant role of regional authorities. As discussed in the first section of this chapter (paragraph 5.1), the Interreg Italy-Austria program consists of the following organs: the Managing Authority, the Joint Secretariat, the Regional Coordination Units, and the Monitoring Committee (of which most members are part of the Task Force). All these organs except the Monitoring Committee and the Task Force are composed exclusively of regional authorities. The national authorities take part only in the discussions of the Monitoring Committee and in the Task Force, established by the Managing Authority for the formulation of the program (Interview 10; Interreg Italy-Austria, 2022a, 2022b). This management structure already points towards decentralization, aligning aligns with the expectations set by the MLG.

Furthermore, although the general tasks of the Managing Authority and the Joint Secretariat are set by regulation (Art 46, EU Regulation 1058/2021), the specific tasks and the introduction of the Regional Coordination Units are established by the regional civil servants themselves who compose these organs and are approved in a formal agreement by the Presidents of the Regions involved in the program (Interview 10; Interreg Italy-Austria, internal document). In this agreement, the national authorities do not play any role (Interview 10).

Nonetheless, national authorities play a role in the allocation of funds. The program is co-financed up to 80% by the ERDF, while the national authorities can decide to cover the missing 20% (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2022b). If they do not cover it, the funds can be provided by regional funds, or in the case of the project funding, also by the beneficiaries themselves (Interview 7). Additionally, national authorities sign a Partnership Agreement, which is set between the single Member States and the European Commission regarding the overall Cohesion Policy with purposes that also apply to Interreg. Therefore, in the formulation and implementation phase, the Interreg Programs should be aligned with the policy objectives set in the Austrian and Italian Partnership Agreement.

5.2.2 Regional involvement in practice

Also in practice, during the formulation phase, regions were the most active participants (Interview 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10). They decided which priorities to develop, ensuring the alignment of the program with both the development strategies of the respective involved regions and the interests of the fund beneficiaries (Interview 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10). Some regions such as the Salzburg and Kärnten regions

were more focused on aligning with the regional development strategies (Interview 7, 6), while Friuli, Venezia Giulia, Veneto, Bolzano and Tirol put more emphasis on the requests made by the potential beneficiaries, including non-state actors such as socioeconomic partners and civil society organizations (Interview 10, 3, 4). This indirectly anticipates the involvement of non-state actors, since their interests have been represented by regional authorities.

Moreover, during the discussions of the Task Force, Regional Coordination Units and the Joint Secretariat indirectly involved other regional administrators, emphasizing the role of regional authorities in the planning of the Interreg program. In particular, Regional Coordination Units took into account the feedback provided by other regional administrators who are experts in sectors potentially eligible as program priorities. These administrators were consulted to provide their suggestions, ideas, and evaluations (Interview 10, 3, 4). Finally, the Joint Secretariat – which is always composed of regional authorities - also took the feedback deriving from consultations with the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (other regional civil servants responsible specifically for overcoming cross-border obstacles) into account during the Task Force (Interview 13, 14).

Additionally, regional authorities play a predominant role in the Monitoring Committee, while national authorities, even if they participate and joint discussions, do not have as impactful of a role in the policy direction of the program (Interview 1b, 10). During the meeting of the Monitoring Committee I took part in, I observed that the large majority of interventions came from the Regional Coordination Units, representing the requests of beneficiaries of their respective territories and the opinions of their respective regional administrations.

5.2.3 National authorities' involvement in practice

While national authorities participated in the Task Force for the formulation of the Interreg Italy-Austria program and in the meetings of the Monitoring Committee, they did not play an impactful role. In the Task Force, the national authorities did not influence decisions (Interview 1c, 16). They mostly observed the progress of the program (Interview 1c, 10). Their interventions in the discussions of the Task Force mostly concerned updating the regional authorities on their decisions regarding their availability of funds to cofinance the program (Interreg Italy-Austria, minutes of meetings). Content-wise, they did not steer the discussion in a particular direction but rather agreed with the decisions of regional authorities, especially their focus on strengthening the CLLD initiative (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2020c). The national authorities also supported regional authorities in a crucial moment of discussion against the will of the European Commission, which

had proposed to reduce the geographical area of the program given the overall reduction of funds provided by the ERDF (Interview 1c; Interreg Italy-Austria, 2020c, 2021d). Concerning the meeting of the Monitoring Committee I attended, the Italian national authorities did not provide any particular feedback, and instead mostly summarized updates on the reorganization of the ministries. The Austrian national authorities did not even speak.

The national authorities however still play an essential role in the allocation of funds to the program, which impacts the formulation of the program since the funds must be divided between the policy priorities. Regions do not influence either the allocation of funding at the EU level or the national portion (Interview 1c, 10). This makes regions dependent on the Member States and is especially clear in the current programming period since the ERDF funds were reduced (Interview 1c). The Italian national authorities tried to support the Interreg program with increased funding for implementing the policy objectives, whereas the Austrian authorities decided to grant additional funding only after the evaluation of every project (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2022b). This decision put the Austrian partners in a vulnerable condition (Interview 10).

The Partnership Agreement did not change in any way the content of the program. The Italian Partnership Agreement was signed after the final draft of the program had been already approved by the European Commission (Interview 1c, 11). Therefore, of course, "there was not a perfect alignment between the Partnership Agreement and the Interreg Program" (Interview 1c). Nonetheless, this did not constitute a problem because the agreement was very general and, in any case, the program policy objectives did not go against the principles of the Partnership Agreement (Interview 1c). Unlike Italy, the Austrian authorities sent the Austrian Partnership Agreement very early, but also in this case, this did not constitute an obstacle in the formulation phase of the program because the policy guidelines contained in the Austrian Agreement were quite general (Interview 1c).

5.2.4 Reasons for regional autonomy in Interreg Italy-Austria

The analysis of the interviews uncovered the reasons behind this large autonomy delegated to the regions and the low involvement of national authorities in the formulation and monitoring phase. Not surprisingly, the state system – in this case, federal for Austria and regional for Italy - is an essential precondition. Austria grants significant autonomy to regions through Article 15A of the Austrian Constitution, which ensures that the Länder (the Austrian federal states) have autonomy and responsibility in managing Cohesion Policy programs, including Interreg (Interview 6,7). In Italy, this autonomy is granted not only by the regional nature of the Italian State. The Managing

Authority and the Joint Secretariat, who make the main decisions in the program and on which the Regional Coordination Units are dependent, are located in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, which by being autonomous, allows for greater flexibility and decision-making power at the regional level, independent of direct national government intervention (Interview 3).

Besides the formal system of the State, there are multiple reasons behind the low national involvement and high regional autonomy. One primary reason for this limited involvement is the size of the program itself (Interview 16, 11). Given that national authorities must follow every Interreg program, they tend to focus more on larger programs (Interreg 16, 4). The Interreg Italy-Austria program is relatively small compared to other cross-border programs, such as Italy-Croatia, which includes more regions and therefore garners more attention from national authorities (Interview 4, 12, 16, 11). To understand this, a comparison of the composition of the Monitoring Committees provides a clear example: in Interreg Italia-Austria, every region has its autonomy to express opinions and contribute to the discussion directly without having the national Italian and Austrian authorities as intermediates, while in larger programs such as Italy-Croatia, there are "national committees" where national authorities act as ambassador of the Italian position representing all the participating Italian regions (Interview 11). Also, the Austrian national authorities focus more on other Interreg Programs which are larger in terms of involved regions or deemed more complex in their implementation (Interview 1c). Furthermore, the form of the state of the counterpart involved in the cross-border cooperation also plays an important role (Interview 16). For example, in Interreg Italy-Slovenia, since Slovenia is a centralized state, the Slovenian government takes a comparatively more active role in the formulation and monitoring of the program, and in the selection of projects (Interview 16). The enhanced involvement of the Slovenian state leads to a corresponding increased involvement of the Italian national authorities (Interview 16). Finally, the low involvement of the national authorities depends also on the knowledge they have about the specificities of the program (Interview 1c). For example, the national authorities struggle to understand the CLLD initiative, which is a peculiarity only of Interreg Italy-Austria (Interview 1c).

5.2.5 Answer to the first sub-question

The section above allows me to answer the first sub-question: "*What is the relationship between the regional authorities and the national authorities in Interreg programs?"*

This sub-question has been operationalized through the analysis of the X1 axis, which revealed a significant degree of autonomy for regional authorities as compared to national ones in Interreg

Italy-Austria. The regional authorities play a central role in the Task Force and Monitoring Committee of the Interreg Italy-Austria program, with regional officials making up the core of its management structure (the Managing Authority, Joint Secretariat, and Regional Coordination Units). Furthermore, the level of regional involvement, both through participation and discussion in the Task Force aligns with the respect of the partnership principle, which prescribes regions to be involved in the development of the programs. National authorities, both Italian and Austrian, are involved in the Task Force and Monitoring Committee, but their influence is limited. Nonetheless, regions are still dependent on the State in matters concerning the allocation of funds for the national portion of financing the program. This configuration is in line with MLG theory's expectation of decentralization, which emphasizes the empowerment of regional entities compared to national authorities.

This analysis also expresses the motives behind the high regional autonomy. This large autonomy can depend on the characteristics of the state structures involved—Austria as a federal state and Italy as a regional state—and the specific nature of the Interreg Italy-Austria program, which is small and relatively straightforward, leading to one interviewee describing the program as "a very independent fish" (Interview 1c). These factors, specific to the Interreg Italy-Austria program, suggest that such autonomy of regional authorities might not be as pronounced in other Interreg programs.

5.3 Relationship between regions and the EU (X1X2 plane)

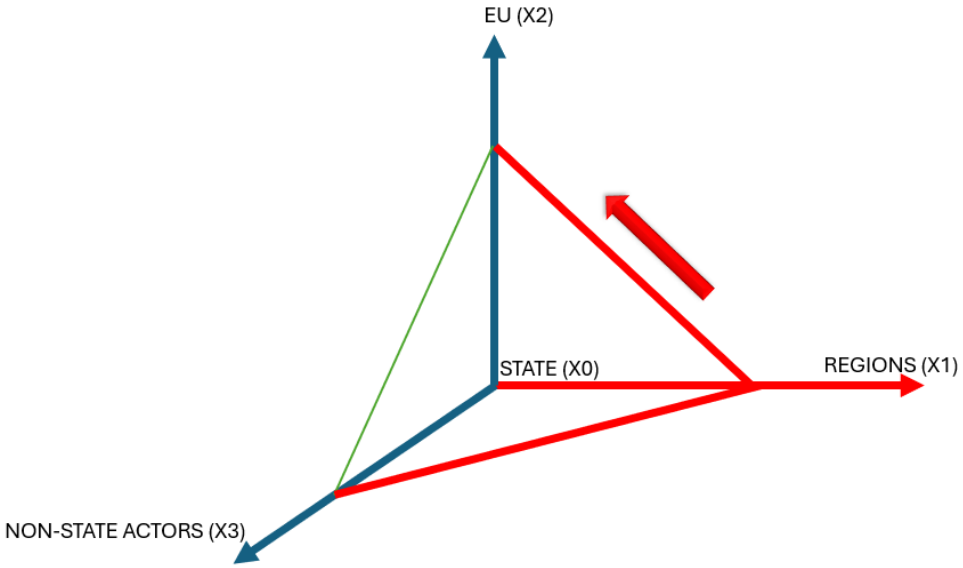

Figure 8. Own elaboration of Piattoni's conceptual framework (2010)

The analysis on the X1X2 plane focuses on the interaction between regions and the EU, as is shown in Figure 8. The arrow highlights the proactivity of the regions toward EU institutions, both in negotiating the specific Interreg program and in shaping EU policies related to the broader Interreg policy framework (European Territorial Cooperation).

According to expectations derived from MLG theory, regions should be able to engage directly with EU institutions without requiring mediation from national governments and influence the development of EU policies. In the context of Interreg programs, this can be operationalized in two different ways, one specific to the negotiations regarding the single program, and the other regarding negotiations that would impact the overall Interreg policy.

Specifically, to assess the fulfilment of these expectations, I will verify:

1) the regions' negotiating capacity with the European Commission regarding the content of the specific Interreg operational program without national intermediation (for example, this could occur through proposals, suggestions, or by demonstrating the ability to resist recommendations from the European Commission when those suggestions are not deemed compatible with local needs);

2) the regions' ability to proactively influence EU policies in defining the overall political objectives and funding set for the overall Interreg policy framework, also known as European Territorial Cooperation (this could be verified for example through the activities of regional offices in Bruxelles or more subtly the invitations to conferences or informal contacts with the EU officials responsible for Interreg programs).

5.3.1 Negotiating capacity on the specific Interreg program

During the formulation phase and monitoring phase, there is direct contact between the Managing Authority and one rapporteur from the European Commission (DG REGIO) to make sure that the EU requirements set by regulations are respected and that feedback and suggestions from the European Commission are considered (Interview 15, 11). National authorities as members of the Task Force, could express their opinions, but the negotiation for specific adjustments to the program occurred exclusively between the Managing Authority and the European Commission. In turn, the Managing Authority consulted with the Regional Coordination Units to justify its decisions. Thus, although the limits set by regulations were very stringent, the regional authorities proved to be able to set their policy objectives with some autonomy (Interview 1c, 3).

For example, the European Commission asked to reduce the geographical areas covered within the Interreg program, basically by eliminating the areas which do not share a border directly (Interview 1c, 10; Interreg Italy-Austria, 2019). The regional authorities vocally opposed this advice because this would have created problems in the implementation of the program (Interview 10). Thus, the regional authorities of the program justified that for the functioning of the program, it was not possible to fulfil that requirement because it would have created problems for the beneficiaries of the projects, channelling the interests of not only public authorities but also non-state actors of the projects (Interview 1c; Interreg Italy-Austria, 2020b). It was already hard for the project partners to find Austrian partners; therefore, it was essential to maintain all the Austrian regions (Interview 10). On the Italian side, the Veneto region, which the Commission wanted to exclude, has a very dynamic economic environment that provided very good partnerships for the implementation of projects (Interview 1c). Moreover, the regional authorities argued that the cooperation had been going on for 30 years (Interview 10). All the regions explained to the European Commission representative why it was essential for every regional area to maintain the program area and also the President of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano asked the European Commission to provide details on such request (Interview 10; Interreg Italy-Austria, 2021b). Eventually, the regions of the program managed to maintain the area of the program unchanged (Interview 1c).

In another example, the European Commission suggested having only one small project fund, while the Interreg Program Italy-Austria actually contained eleven small project funds within the CLLD approach, one for each Local Action Group that composes each CLLD area (Interview 1c). This decentralized structure was aligned with a bottom-up approach, aimed at empowering local actors and promoting self-managed regional development (Interview 1c, 8, 9). When the European Commission initially requested a single fund for small projects, the Managing Authority, in contact with the Local Action Groups, objected, arguing that their more localized arrangement better met the needs of the territory and reflected their multi-level governance policy (Interview 1c). After discussions, the European Commission agreed to the proposal to maintain the 11 separate funds, recognizing that this solution was more consistent with the program's approach (Interview 8).

Nonetheless, on other suggestions, the EU Commission has been stricter. For example, the program authorities had to reserve a program priority on biodiversity and climate change, although they knew this would create problems in the long term (Interview 3, 1c). In the meeting of the Monitoring Committee I attended, the regional authorities expressed to the EU Commission representative these concerns, but this did not lead to any variation in the program's priorities.

5.3.2 Influence on the European Territorial Cooperation

Although the regional authorities of Interreg Italy-Austria had a certain degree of autonomy on the policy objectives during the formulation of the specific program, they did not play any meaningful role in defining the objectives and funding for the European Territorial Cooperation (the overall Interreg policy framework). The reasons uncovered behind this lack of influence seem to be generalizable also to other Interreg operational programs.

The lack of influence of regional authorities in Interreg policy objectives and funding is the result of a variety of common factors to other Interreg operational programs. The policy objectives are set within the broader umbrella of Cohesion Policy. In this context, regional authorities do not play a significant role, as the Interreg policy framework suffers from an "inferiority complex" due to the program being only a small part of the broader Cohesion Policy (Interview 1c). Furthermore, funding for Interreg programs is contingent on the EU budget allocations, which are influenced by broader policy priorities and decisions made by the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament (Interview 16). For instance, during the last programming period, significant focus was placed on the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and Horizon Europe, resulting in reduced funds for Interreg programs (Interview 1b). Such reduction, in the case of Interreg Italy-Austria, led to a revaluation of the policy objectives in the formulation phase because this meant that some priorities of the Interreg Italy-Austria program had to be structured with fewer funds (Interview 1c). Finally, the Interreg programs are at the EU level often considered less impactful compared to other programs of Cohesion Policy, because the results of Interreg policies are less “infrastructural”, they are not immediate. “It is easier to cut when there are no immediate outcomes of growth” (Interview 10).

Nonetheless, regional authorities can to a certain extent exert pressure on the European Commission on more specific requirements. In particular, regional authorities of the Interreg Italy-Austria are strongly advocating for the CLLD initiative, leading potential changes in the future programming period of European Territorial Cooperation within Cohesion Policy (Interview 15, 1c, 1a). The Managing Authority proudly said that “the European Commission seems very interested in our approach regarding the Community Local Development, and the director of Interreg policies of DG REGIO hopes that this model can be applied in every Interreg Program” (Interview 1c). This was confirmed also by the rapporteur from the EU Commission of the Interreg Program Italy-Austria (Interview 15). She said that there have been meetings at her cabinet to discuss CLLD, which has been defined “a very energetic topic” (Interview 15). Furthermore, to advertise concretely the

model, regional authorities from the Interreg Italy-Austria program have been invited to European-level conferences for the future of Interreg and they hope that they will be able to shape European Policies in this sense (Interview 1c). In November 2024 regional authorities from the Interreg Italy-Austria will also present the CLLD approach in Brussels at the regional office of Brussels and hope to spread this approach. Finally, next year, regional authorities will have a panel about CLLD at the Capital of Culture in Gorizia (Italy) where authorities from all the Interreg programs are invited (Interview 1c).

5.3.3 Answer to the second sub-question

This section allows me to answer the second sub-question: *What is the relationship between regional authorities and the EU institutions in Interreg programs?*

This sub-question has been operationalized on the X1X2 plane through the analysis of the regions' capacity to negotiate directly with the European Commission on specific program content, as well as their ability to influence broader EU policies related to the overall Interreg policy framework.

Regional authorities do not have negotiating power with European institutions regarding the overall framework of Interreg programs, including the definition of broad policy objectives and the distribution of funding. These decisions are made at a higher level in the realm of the broader Cohesion Policy, established by the European Commission in collaboration with the European Council and the European Parliament. The strategic priorities and financial allocations for Interreg programs are thus shaped by EU-wide considerations, and regions have limited influence in this process.

However, regions can influence the specific content and implementation of individual Interreg programs, such as Interreg Italy-Austria, by negotiating with the European Commission to adapt the program to local needs. Regional authorities play an active role in shaping the details of these programs, ensuring that they are tailored to their specific territorial and socioeconomic contexts. They can directly interact with EU institutions, bypassing national authorities, to propose adjustments that better align with local priorities.

This distinction leads to the conclusion that the expectation derived from MLG theory of regional influence in negotiations with EU institutions in Interreg programs is partially realized. While regional authorities cannot influence the overarching strategic objectives or funding distribution at

the EU level, they can shape the specific content of the programs through direct engagement with European institutions, without the need for state intervention.

5.4 Relationship between regions and non-state actors (X1X3 plane)

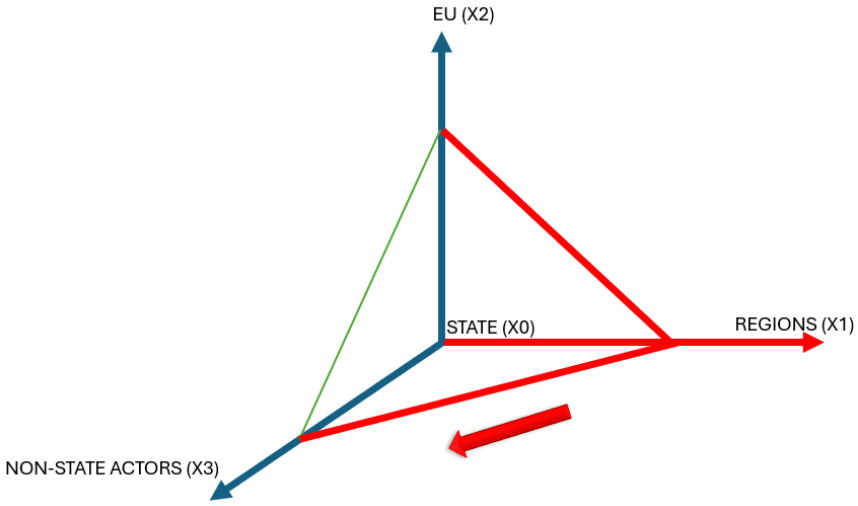

Figure 9. Own elaboration of Piattoni's conceptual framework (Piattoni, 2010)

The third part of this analysis deals with the relationship between regions and non-state actors, graphically shown in Figure 9. The arrow highlights the expectation derived from MLG which states that regions should involve non-state actors in decision-making processes. This is also a requirement of the partnership principle. I assessed how regional authorities involved non-state actors according to:

1) direct participation in decision-making forums, by assessing the inclusion of non-state actors in decision-making forums (in the Task Force meetings that led to the formulation of the program, and in the meetings of the Monitoring Committee which are relevant for the formulation and implementation phases of the program);
2) indirect participation, by evaluating whether non-state actors contribute indirectly to the program's formulation, for example, by participating in working groups, public consultations, or expert panels;
3) influence of non-state actors on policy outcomes (which I evaluate in the paragraphs regarding indirect and direct participation), by assessing the actual impact that non-state actors have on the formulation and implementation of the Interreg program.

5.4.1 Direct Participation in decision-making forums

From the analysis of the interview results, it appears that the direct participation of non-state actors was not foreseen in the Task Force responsible for the program formulation and has been inconsistent and ineffective in the meetings of the monitoring committees.

Absence of Non-State Actors in the Task Force for Program Formulation

The interviews revealed that non-state actors were not directly involved in the formulation phase of the Interreg Italy-Austria 2021-2027 program, where program priorities were defined, and concrete strategies were determined to be implemented in the regions. The Task Force members consisted of regional authorities (including the Managing Authority, the Joint Secretariat, and representatives of all Regional Coordination Units), along with representatives of national authorities from Austria and Italy and a representative from the European Commission (DG Regio), who participated as an observer. This demonstrates that no socioeconomic partners were directly included in the decision-making process, meaning non-state actors had no direct role in shaping the political objectives of the program.

The absence of socioeconomic partners resulted in contrast with the partnership principle, prompting a request for clarification from the European Commission's representative, who asked how socioeconomic partners would be included (Interview 10). The Managing Authority responded that, for efficiency reasons, it was easier not to include them, as the Task Force needed to be streamlined and operational to ensure timely decisions (Interview 10). However, the Managing Authority reassured the European Commission that socioeconomic and civil society representatives of the Monitoring Committee would have access to program drafts and would be informed the progress of the Task Force's work through the Monitoring Committee meetings. Therefore, non-state actors would have the opportunity, although indirectly, to express their views during the Monitoring Committee meetings or consultations (Interview 6).

The reasons why socioeconomic partners were excluded from the Task Force was attributed to their lack of time and expertise, which created a resource imbalance—an obstacle to active participation in decision-making processes (Interview 1b, 10). Interviewees pointed out that program development requires significant time and expertise, making it difficult to include socioeconomic actors, who are usually engaged in other work. The Task Force met almost once a month, requiring discussions and feedback, which would have been a significant burden for socioeconomic actors (Interview 6). "Socioeconomic partners simply have another job, while we [regional authorities]

work full-time on the program, so we cannot expect the same level of participation" (Interview 1c). One interviewee adds that even "if we [regional authorities] had asked them to be more involved in the policy formulation, they probably would not have participated" (Interview 10). This statement highlights the gap between theory and practice—the difference between what multilevel governance and the partnership principle of the EU require and what is realistically feasible. For example, representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, who participate in the Monitoring Committee, do not have the time or specific expertise to closely follow the program's development, which requires active participation at every stage (Interview 10, 4).

Nonetheless, there is a positive exception regarding the representatives of Local Action Groups. Although these actors were not part of the Task Force, they received program drafts and used the opportunity to comment on them. These comments were discussed within the Task Force, with great openness from the Managing Authority (Interviews 8, 9).

Direct Participation of Non-State Actors in the meetings of the Monitoring Committee

In the Monitoring Committee of Interreg Italy-Austria, socioeconomic representatives can participate and vote. According to the Managing Authority, the Monitoring Committee meetings offer the best opportunities for socioeconomic partners to participate, as they can come prepared and engage actively (Interview 1b). Since the formulation phase lasted nearly two years, socioeconomic partners did have the chance to discuss the Task Force's work during Monitoring Committee meetings. However, representatives of the Local Action Groups, which could represent the interest of specific cross-border areas from local authorities and especially socioeconomic partners and civil society organizations, are not members of the Monitoring Committee, so they could not directly participate in the meetings.

Furthermore, the participation of non-state actors in the Monitoring Committee, already limited to socioeconomic partners, presented challenges. Socioeconomic partners do not always engage actively due to their work commitments, and attending the meetings requires prior preparation. The Managing Authority further explained that socioeconomic representatives are not consistently willing to step forward, especially in the social sector (Interview 1b). "Often, we [regional authorities of the program] have to remind them that their voice is important. More often than not, it's up to us to energize the partnership, rather than the other way around" (Interview 1b). This is also reflected in the fact that if stakeholders from the socioeconomic sector or civil society organizations need to have their interests addressed, their first point of contact is not the

representatives in the Monitoring Committee, but the Regional Coordination Units (Interviews 1b, 3, 4).

Finally, even when non-state actors do attend Monitoring Committee meetings, they often observe rather than contribute actively, as such participation is not their primary responsibility (Interview 1a, 1b, 5). For example, during a Monitoring Committee meeting, I attended as part of my university internship, I observed that the Chamber of Commerce representative merely watched without participating in the discussions. Furthermore, when I asked the interviewees if they could recall any interventions by socioeconomic partners during the Monitoring Committee meetings, they struggled to provide examples, suggesting that such interactions are rare. The European Commission expects significant participation, but this often does not materialize in practice (Interview 5).

5.4.2 Indirect Participation

Despite the "exclusivity of the Task Force" that led to the program's formulation, the program authorities—composed entirely of regional public officials—did involve non-state actors more broadly through surveys, and consultations. The results of the feedback were then expressed by the regional authorities in the meetings of the Task Force and the meetings of the Monitoring Committee.

Surveys by the Joint Secretariat

The Joint Secretariat organized two surveys to understand stakeholder preferences (local authorities, but also non-state actors) and the needs of the territories, and to take these into account in the formulation of the Interreg 2021-2027 program (Interview 2). More specifically, these consultations provided feedback to select the program's priorities based on the five macro-areas[4] established by the European Commission through regulation.

The first online territorial consultation involved over 250 stakeholders who were asked to prioritize the themes for each specific objective of the program and to propose additional objectives (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2020a). A second online territorial consultation with stakeholders targeted a broader audience—not only potential beneficiaries but also citizens—to better represent the interests of civil

[4] The policy priorities are described on page 42.

society (Interreg Italy-Austria, 2021a). Over 350 people responded, providing suggestions for possible actions and project ideas.

In terms of the types of participants involved in the Joint Secretariat consultations, it is notable that although the surveys were intended to include non-state actors, the majority of participants were public authorities. In the first consultation, only 30% of the respondents from Italy and Austria were private actors, showing that even this indirect involvement in the decision-making process primarily concerned public actors, which aligns with criticisms of multilevel systems and the application of the partnership principle, which should involve non-state actors (Interview 2). In the second consultation, the results were more positive, as a wider range of non-state actors participated.

Nonetheless, achieving participation proved challenging; the Joint Secretariat, with assistance from the Regional Coordination Units, had to repeatedly advertise the surveys on the website and ultimately send them personally to the beneficiaries (Interview 10, 1b, 2). This effort led to limited participation of new stakeholders, as the beneficiaries had already been engaged in the program. The Managing Authority argues that the incentives for participating in surveys were quite low, partly because stakeholders are often involved in multiple consultations simultaneously, including those for other Interreg programs or other EU-funded programs, which often have similar questions (Interview 1b, 1a, 2).

Consultations by the Regional Coordination Units

Three of the six Regional Coordination Units (Veneto, Bolzano, and Friuli Venezia Giulia) not only promoted the survey launched by the Joint Secretariat but also organized additional consultations, both online and in person, to involve non-state actors alongside public authorities. These consultations aimed to better represent the needs of the regional areas during the program formulation phase. The non-state actors involved were socioeconomic representatives (such as agricultural, trade, and craft unions, professional associations, and chambers of commerce), research institutes, and civil society organizations (including LAGs focused on community-led local development, environmental and cultural NGOs, social inclusion organizations, volunteer groups, and advocacy groups representing people with disabilities) (Interview 3, 4, 10).

During these consultations, participants had the opportunity to submit comments, proposals, and observations (Interview 3, 4, 11). The results were considered by the Regional Coordination Units during the meetings of the Planning Task Force, although they were not always deemed particularly relevant for setting the policy priorities of the Interreg program (Interview 10). Nonetheless, in the

Veneto region, the participation of non-state actors led to concrete proposals that were included in the final Interreg Italy-Austria program document (Interview 3).

Furthermore, in the provinces of Bolzano and Veneto, non-state actors formed a stable network that acts as a "contact group" with the regional authorities. This network is relevant not only during the program formulation phase, where it contributes to discussions on program drafts, but also during the implementation phase, where it helps to promote new calls for projects, provide information, and gather feedback on the program's progress (Interview 3, 5).

More institutionalized networks were present in Tyrol. This region adopted an alternative approach that allowed for the excellent integration of socioeconomic partners and civil society organizations. Tyrol is divided into "Regionalmanagement-Vereine", which are associations composed of municipalities and socioeconomic partners. Some of these associations are included in the Community-Led Local Development area (Interview 8). Through regular, direct contact with these associations, which are stable networks, the Tyrol Regional Coordination Unit gathered feedback from socioeconomic partners, which was then presented to the Task Force, particularly regarding the program's fourth priority, focused on community-led local development (Interview 8).

In contrast, the regions of Carinthia and Salzburg did not organize stakeholder consultations but instead limited their efforts to sending out questionnaires to public officials and holding meetings between regional departments (Interview 6, 7).

Informal meetings by the Managing Authority

The Managing Authority emphasized that face-to-face dialogue, facilitated by informal networks such as conversations before formal meetings or direct informal consultations, is often a valuable way to gather feedback (interview 1a, 1b). However, this was largely impossible during most of the formulation phase due to the COVID-19 situation, except for ongoing contact with representatives of the Local Action Groups, which remained consistent throughout both the formulation and implementation phases (Interview 1b). Although representatives of Local Action Groups did not participate directly in the Task Force and Monitoring Committee’s meetings, the regional authorities maintained regular contact, both formal and informal, with these groups to receive feedback for the fourth priority. “There is always good communication, and the groups demonstrate active involvement, feeling a strong sense of responsibility for their territory and regional development. They are motivated to participate and share ideas, especially regarding innovation” (Interview 1c). The regional authorities have created opportunities for mutual dialogue, receiving important

feedback, which was then used in program formulation. The Managing Authority emphasized the importance of informal moments in relationships with the Local Action Groups. Through the Local Action Groups, a strong and stable connection was established (Interview 9).

Consultations and working groups by Local Action Groups

As mentioned in the description of the case, Local Action Groups are involved in the Interreg Italy-Austria program in two keyways: they contribute to shaping the fourth priority of the overall Interreg Italy-Austria program, as shown by the interactions with the Managing Authority; second, they formulate within their CLLD area their development strategies to implement this priority. Each CLLD area, consisting of three or four Local Action Groups, develops its own strategy, which must then be approved by the Managing Authority of the Interreg Italy-Austria program. Four such strategies were ultimately approved, corresponding to the four CLLD areas: Wipptal, HeurOpen, Dolomiti Live, and Terra Raetica.

To formulate their strategies, the LAGs organized a series of consultations with both their members and a broader range of stakeholders from their CLLD area. These included public videoconferences, working groups, and thematic focus groups aimed at defining local strategies, which later facilitated the development of cross-border projects by gathering feedback on concerns and proposals related to local development. In the strategy HeurOpen and Dolomiti Live, the Local Action Groups management bodies sent drafts of the strategy to their members, who could then directly comment, providing feedback, suggestions, and project ideas—something that, for instance, was not possible for the general document of the Interreg Italy-Austria Program (Heur Open LAG, nd, Dolomiti Live LAG, nd). The Local Action Group in the Heur Open area also published strategy drafts on their website to engage a wider audience (Interview 9). In the HeurOpen strategy, focus groups even became permanent working groups to provide feedback on the progress of the strategy. In the four CLLD areas of priority in the Interreg Italy-Austria Program related to Community-Led Local Development, the participation of non-state actors was active and effective, attracting great interest from European institutions. For this reason, in recent years, the Local Action Groups have also been involved during summer visits by institutions, including the European Commission, to observe their local development strategies (Interviews 1b, 5), which, as highlighted on page 52, could be extended to other European programs.

5.4.3 Answer to the third sub-question

Based on this analysis the third sub-question can be answered: *How are non-state actors involved in Interreg programs?*

The third sub-question has been operationalized through the analysis of X1X3 plane of Piattoni's model, which focuses on the relationship between regions and non-state actors, by assessing direct and indirect participation in decision-making processes.

Non-state actors had a limited role in the Interreg Italy-Austria program. They were excluded from the Task Force to maintain program efficiency and had minimal impact in the Monitoring Committee due to insufficient expertise and time. Furthermore, representatives of Local Action Groups were excluded from both Task Force and Monitoring Committee discussions. Indirect participation included surveys, online consultations, and informal meetings. Although surveys aimed at including a wide range of stakeholders, the majority were public authorities and not non-state actors. In this sense, I see a multi-level *involvement*, but not multi-level *governance*, substantiating the critics made by Blom-Hansen (2005, p. 628), and not fulfilling MLG theory expectation of effective inclusion from regional authorities of non-state actors in the policy-making.

Nonetheless, while the feedback from consultations received was not always impactful, it sometimes led to the formation of stable networks in the Veneto Region, the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, and in a more institutionalized way, in Tirol. Furthermore, the consultations organized by Local Action Groups to develop CLLD strategies proved to be effective, allowing for a meaningful and direct engagement with a broad range of stakeholders through public videoconferences, working groups, and thematic focus groups. This aspect of the program illustrates a positive application of multi-level governance and of the partnership principle, where non-state actors had a substantial role in developing and implementing local strategies, thereby embodying a more effective form of multi-level governance and respecting the expectation of effective involvement of non-state actors in the decision-making processes.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

This master’s thesis aims to answer how multi-level governance is being implemented in Interreg. In particular, the research focused on the contentious issues of MLG systems, which are the role of the regions in their relationship with the national authorities and the EU institutions and non-state actors' involvement. To address these contentious issues three sub-questions were developed and operationalized through the conceptual model of Piattoni (2010), evaluating whether the relationships between the actors align with the expectations of MLG theory and with the EU requirement of the partnership principle. The chosen case to address the sub-questions and respond to the research question has been the Interreg Program Italy-Austria. First, by involving Austria - a federal State - and Italy - a regional State - regions are expected to be empowered, by having control over the program, being autonomous from the State and being able to negotiate directly with the EU institutions. Secondly, Interreg Italy-Austria presented in its priorities the CLLD approach, which led to the expectation of effective non-state actors' involvement.

6.1 Summary of the three sub-questions

6.1.1 First sub-question: decentralization and regional autonomy (X1 axis)

The first sub-question analyzed the relationship between the regions and the national authorities in Interreg Italy-Austria using the X1 axis. This has been evaluated by examining the regional authorities and national authorities' involvement in the Task Force and the Monitoring Committee, and the related regional autonomy from the State decisions. The Interreg Italy-Austria program exhibits significant decentralization, with regional authorities playing a central role in both the formulation and implementation phases of the program. The management structure, consisting of the Managing Authority, the Joint Secretariat, and Regional Coordination Units, is almost entirely composed of regional officials. This structure empowers regions to make decisions autonomously, particularly in defining and aligning policy priorities with regional strategies. National authorities have a minimal role in the decision-making processes. Their participation is largely formal, with limited influence on the program's direction. This is consistent with the MLG theory, where power is dispersed across multiple levels of government, reducing the central state's control in favour of regional governance. More specifically, the system reflects MLG Type I, where authority is distributed among territorial units at different levels, with clearly defined and relatively stable jurisdictions. Furthermore, this strong regional involvement demonstrates that, in this aspect, the partnership principle has been respected as the EU advocates and prescribes in the regulations.

6.1.2. Second sub-question: interactions between regions and EU institutions (X1X2 plane)

The second sub-question analyzed the relationship between regional authorities with EU institutions in Interreg Italy-Austria on the X1X2 plane. Regions maintain direct communication with the European Commission, particularly through the Managing Authority. While the European Commission ensures that EU regulations are followed, it allows regional authorities a certain degree of flexibility in negotiating the program priorities. This negotiation reflects MLG theory's expectation of direct interactions between regions and supranational institutions without the need for state mediation. Nonetheless, the analysis showed that although the regions could have discretion for the definition of the policy priorities specific to the Interreg program, they do not have relevant influence in defining the policy objectives set in the EU regulations and applicable to the overall Interreg policy framework. From this point of view, MLG theory does not hold since it would expect the influence of the regions on the EU policies regarding the Interreg policy framework (European Territorial Cooperation).

6.1.3 Third sub-question: involvement of non-state actors (X1X3 plane)

The program includes mechanisms for involving non-state actors, such as consultations and the inclusion of socioeconomic partners in Monitoring Committee. However, the degree of influence these actors have can vary. While they are consulted and their input is considered, the decision-making power remains largely with regional authorities. This is also because of the need to streamline decision-making processes, which leads to the exclusion of non-state actors from certain stages (e.g., in the formulation phase of the Task Force). Furthermore, the level of non-state actor participation and influence is often limited due to disparities in resources in terms of expertise and time. The limited impact of non-state actors reflects a form of MLG that is more about multi-level *involvement* rather than fully shared *governance* and reflects the tension between the theoretical ideals of MLG and the practicalities of governance.

However, there are exceptions. First, some consultations led to the creation of stable networks that resemble Type II of MLG, where the division between authorities and non-state actors is blurred. This happened in Veneto and the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, and in a more institutionalized way in Tirol. Secondly, the implementation of the fourth priority, CLLD, is a significant example of how non-state actors are engaged and also reflects Type II of MLG. In these areas, Local Action Groups, composed of various public and private stakeholders, play a crucial role in developing and implementing local strategies. The development of the strategies can be considered as a group

project where every stakeholder has an equal right to contribute. In this specific part of the program, Interreg Italy-Austria implements full-fledged multi-level *governance*, and not only *involvement*, by fostering partnerships that go beyond governmental levels to include civil society and local economic actors.

6.2 Answer to the main research question

The main research question explores how multilevel governance is being implemented in Interreg. Although the analysis focused specifically on Interreg Italy-Austria, the findings provide insights that may offer broader implications for other Interreg programs.

First, the regional level seems to play an influential role in Interreg programs, but the extent of their involvement depends on several factors. The case of Interreg Italy-Austria showed that the federal (Austrian) and regional (Italian) state structures of the countries involved had a significant impact. In countries with more centralized systems, the regions likely do not have the same level of decentralized and autonomous management of the program, despite the regional perspective that every Interreg program within European Territorial Cooperation is expected to have. Additionally, as reported in the interviews, the involvement of national authorities also depends on the size of the Interreg program: in geographically large programs, national authorities play a more significant role. This indicates that while the expectation derived from MLG theory for a decentralized system was fulfilled in the case of Interreg Italy-Austria, this may not necessarily apply to other Interreg programs.

Secondly, when regions have autonomy in program management, as seen in the case of Interreg Italy-Austria, this autonomy often leads to direct interactions with EU institutions regarding specific program objectives. For example, regions in Interreg Italy-Austria were able to negotiate certain elements of the program directly with the European Commission. Similar dynamics can likely be expected in other Interreg programs where regions maintain a comparable level of control over program management. In larger programs or countries with more centralized governance structures, these interactions are more likely to be mediated by national authorities. Again, this indicates that while the expectation of MLG theory for direct negotiation between regions and EU institutions was fulfilled in the case of Interreg Italy-Austria, this may not necessarily apply to other Interreg programs.

Thirdly, despite their negotiation power with representatives from DG REGIO during the specific operational program development, the overall influence of regions within the broader Interreg

framework remains limited. This is primarily due to the relatively small scale of Interreg programs compared to the larger Cohesion Policy. While regions have limited influence over funding, they can shape specific Interreg objectives, as demonstrated by the European Commission's support of CLLD. If regions with substantial autonomy, such as those in Interreg Italy-Austria, are unable to influence overarching policy objectives at the EU level, it can be inferred that regional influence would be equal to or even less in other Interreg programs where regional authorities are more dependent on national governments. This indicates that the expectation derived from MLG theory of mobilization of regional authorities at the EU level is mostly not respected.

Finally, regarding non-state actors, the data from Interreg Italy-Austria revealed that their participation was mostly indirect, creating a system that resembles multilevel *involvement* rather than true *governance,* and fulfilling only partially the MLG theory expectation regarding non-state actors' involvement. This finding likely can be generalized to other Interreg programs since the Monitoring Committee structure is common to all Interreg programs. Moreover, the non-state actors participating in Interreg Italy-Austria are also involved in other Interreg programs with other bordering countries or in the larger transnational programs that involve geographical areas of Europe, so issues such as lack of time and resources seen in Interreg Italy-Austria are likely present in other Interreg programs as well. However, as mentioned, a key feature that sets Interreg Italy-Austria apart is the CLLD approach, which, though limited to just one program priority, has proven effective in facilitating the involvement of non-state actors.

6.3 Limitations and further research to address them

Although I was able to make some generalizations from my findings, I must acknowledge that the external validity of this research has certain limitations. First, the results may apply to Interreg cross-border programs, where only two countries are involved, but not necessarily to Interreg transnational programs, where multiple countries are involved and other factors not studied in this research could emerge. Interreg cross-border programs represent the majority, with 72.2% of the Interreg funds allocated to them. However, there are also programs covering larger areas of Europe (Interreg B programs) or the entire European Union (Interreg C). Furthermore, even within Interreg cross-border programs (Interreg A programs), variations exist, due to the impact of state structure and program size. In this regard, further research should test whether the findings and conclusions drawn from Interreg Italy-Austria apply to other Interreg cross-border programs and Interreg transnational programs.

Another limitation of this study is the use of MLG theory itself. Although crucial for addressing the research question, the theory encompasses diverse concepts such as "participation" (of non-state actors), "mobilization" (of regions at the EU level), and "autonomy" (of regions from national authorities), yet it does not provide clear indicators for determining whether its expectations are fulfilled. This lack of concrete indicators made the research more challenging, as it was initially difficult to understand what specific elements to look for in the data. As a result, I had to develop my own indicators to assess whether the expectations of MLG theory were met. While this contributed to the operationalization of MLG theory within Piattoni's conceptual model (2010) that could be applied to other Interreg programs, it also made it more difficult to conduct a full-fledged congruence analysis using MLG. Finally, since MLG theory features specific propositions but does not offer clear causal mechanisms, this limits reliability. For future research, it would be beneficial to use a causal theory alongside MLG to enhance the relevance of the findings.

6.4 Academic relevance and future research on MLG systems and theory

Firstly, the research operationalized MLG theory to assess whether its expectations were met. As just discussed, in the Interreg Italy-Austria program, authority is effectively decentralized, empowering regional actors and enabling direct engagement with the European Commission, which aligns with MLG expectations. However, this level of decentralization may not extend to other Interreg programs. Furthermore, MLG expectations fall short in terms of regional influence on EU policies and the involvement of non-state actors.

Secondly, the research also aligns with broader findings from the Cohesion Policy framework. The findings of the analysis of the Interreg Italy-Austria program are in line with Leonardi and Nanetti's research (2011), which found that regions in federal and regional states are more likely to exercise control over the management of operational programs. My findings are consistent also with Thielemann's research (1999), which highlighted that German Länder, despite having strong control over operational programs, faced limitations in influencing EU policies. Additionally, the study on Interreg Italy-Austria supports existing research on the low involvement of non-state actors in monitoring committees and the shortcomings of the partnership principle (Lackowska-Madurowicz & Swianiewicz, 2013; Piattoni, 2010).

Thirdly, the research also addressed indirectly the ongoing debate about the democratic implications of MLG systems. While the MLG approach is often praised for its potential to enhance democratic legitimacy by involving a wide range of actors (Hooghe & Marks, 2001), the findings from this case

study suggest that the involvement of non-state actors in the Interreg Italy-Austria program is primarily consultative and does not significantly shape policy outcomes. This aligns with critiques of MLG that question the depth of non-state actor involvement and call for more substantive participation to fulfil the democratic promises of MLG. Future research may go deeper into the implications of democratic governance and MLG, for example by applying the model provided by Torfing et al., that analyses, next to the involvement of stakeholders directly affected by the policy, the relevance of elected politicians in steering (multi-level) networks, the democratic practices within decision-making procedures, and citizen engagement (2012). Always related to democracy, further research could focus on democratic legitimacy according to the concepts of input, throughput and output legitimacy proposed by Schimdt (2013). Collaborative governance frameworks, such as those by Ansell and Gash (2008), could also provide valuable perspectives on how CLLD processes can be analyzed to enhance democratic engagement and legitimacy within MLG systems.

Lastly, MLG theory has been considered by Marks and Hooghe also as a theory of European Integration (2001). In this regard, the peculiarity of MLG theory is that integration does not focus on state-to-state interactions but is prompted also by regions. Although this has not been the core of the research, the findings show that regions are in control of the Interreg Italy-Austria, facilitating the integration of these two countries through constant collaboration in the formulation and implementation of the program, and introducing direct collaborations with the European Commission.

6.5 Societal relevance and policy recommendations

The findings of this research can hold significant societal relevance for several reasons. The research examined adherence to the partnership principle as mandated by EU Cohesion Policy regulations and evaluated whether the Interreg Program Italy-Austria meets the EU's expectations for the upcoming Cohesion Policy period regarding stakeholder engagement, revealing both successes and shortcomings. Additionally, it explored the effectiveness of the CLLD approach in engaging non-state actors and implementing place-based, bottom-up strategies.

Firstly, the study identifies ongoing weaknesses in the application of the partnership principle and in stakeholders' engagement. While regional authorities are effectively involved, non-state actors specified in Article 8 of EU Regulation 1060/2021 have not significantly impacted decision-making or policy outcomes within Interreg. The research highlights challenges such as limited time and

resources among non-state actors, whose primary roles do not typically involve extensive participation. To enhance adherence to the partnership principle and increase policy ownership, it is recommended that non-state actors be engaged throughout the entire decision-making process, including during the formulation of program drafts by Task Forces. Merely updating them during Monitoring Committee meetings is insufficient, as many decisions affecting the program's direction are made beforehand. To address this, it is proposed that socioeconomic partners and civil society organizations be included as full-time representatives within the management structure of Interreg Programs. This would provide them with the necessary competence and time to participate meaningfully in decision-making.

Secondly, the research underscores that direct consultations through formal, or even better informal meetings, are more effective than surveys. The findings from Interreg Italy-Austria indicate that meetings, possibly in-person, should be prioritized to ensure that the interests of non-state actors are adequately considered. Although this approach requires more time, resources and an accurate selection of the representatives to consult, it would enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of stakeholder engagement.

Thirdly, the research uncovered other organizational models within regional administrations that effectively integrate non-state actors' interests. One example is the approach used by the Land Tirol, where regional authorities maintain constant contact with associations representing public-private partnerships. This ensures regular communication and provides non-state actors with the opportunity to express their concerns frequently, making Task Force meetings more inclusive, even if direct participation in formal decision-making stages is not always feasible. To improve inclusivity across Interreg programs, other regions could adopt a similar model, creating continuous dialogue channels with non-state actors, thus ensuring their input is consistently considered in governance processes.

Lastly, the CLLD approach has proven highly effective in involving local authorities and non-state actors in the formulation of strategies for the fourth priority of the Interreg Italy-Austria program. The multiple working groups and opportunities for feedback have enhanced stakeholder ownership and strategy development. It is recommended to integrate CLLD as a priority into all Interreg cross-border programs to replicate these successful outcomes and ensure that at least a portion of each program benefits from this collaborative approach. Concerning Interreg Italy-Austria, the impact of CLLD could be more effective by including the representatives of the Local Action Groups as full members of the Monitoring Committee.

As a personal note, though still relevant to this research, I am committed to proposing and, if possible, implementing these policy recommendations. In September 2024, I was hired by the Regional Coordination Unit of Friuli Venezia Giulia of Interreg Italy-Austria, where I aim to contribute directly. At the European Institutions level, I also hope to present these concerns and proposals at the Youth Conference on the Future of Interreg by the European Commission, taking place next November in Brussels.

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Appendix

Coding tree

- **X1 state-regions**
  - **regional involvement**
    - **regional autorithies in practice**
      - participation in the Monitoring Committee
      - **participation in the Task Force**
        - feedback from EGTCs (regional civil servants)
        - feedback from specialised regional civil servants
        - regional development strategies
    - **regional autorithies formal role**
      - in the managment structure
  - **national autorithies involvement**
    - **national autorithies in practice**
      - participation in the Monitoring Committee (National autorithies)
      - participation in the Task Force (national autorithies)
    - **national autorithies formal role**
      - funding
      - Partnership Agreement
- **X1X2 regions-EU**
  - **negotiation specific to the Interreg program**
    - direct interactions
    - negotiation in the task force with EU Commission
  - **mobilization at the EU level**
    - influence on Cohesion Policy objectives
    - influence on funding
    - influence on specific Interreg objectives
- **X1X3 regions-non-state actors**
  - **direct participation**
    - participation in the Monitoring Committe
    - resource imbalances of expertise
    - resource imbalances of time
    - task force exclusiveness
  - **indirect participation**
    - consultations by Joint Secretariat
    - consultations by Local Acion Groups for CLLD strategies
    - consultations by Regional Coordination Units
    - difficulties in the involvement
    - effect on policy outcomes
    - informal meetings with the Managing Authority
    - representivenesess of stakeholders
    - stakeholders network

Interviews list

Interview number	Date	Type	Role
Interview 1a, 1b, 1c	1a: 7/05/2024 1b: 13/06/2024 1c: 10/07/2024	individual	Managing Authority – Interreg Program Italy-Austria
Interview 2	11/06/2024	individual	Joint Secretariat – Interreg Program Italy-Austria
Interview 3	18/06/2024	dyadic	Regional Coordination Unit – Veneto and Head of European Policies
Interview 4	19/06/2024	individual	Regional Coordination Unit – Tirol
Interview 5	11/06/2024	individual	Regional Coordination Unit – Autonomous Province of Bolzano
Interview 6	18/06/2024	dyadic	Regional Coordination Unit – Kaernten
Interview 7	11/06/2024	individual	Regional Coordination - Salzburg
Interview 8	21/06/2024	small focus group	Local Action Group – Dolomiti Live
Interview 9	14/06/2024	dyadic	Local Action Group - HeurOpen
Interview 10	06/05/2024	individual	Regional Coordination Unit - Friuli-Venezia Giulia
Interview 11	07/06/2024	individual	Regional Coordination Unit - Friuli-Venezia Giulia (head of International Relations)
Interview 12	02/05/2024	individual	Regional Coordination Unit - Friuli-Venezia Giulia (former project manager)
Interview 13	21/06/2024	individual	EGTC Euregio
Interview 14	26(06/2024	individual	EGTC Euregio Senza Confini
Interview 15	20/06/2024	individual	DG REGIO – European Commission
Interview 16	26/06/2024	individual	Italian Ministry – Department of Cohesion Policies