

## VOLUNTARY TERRITORIAL PLANNING TOOLS AND BOUNDARIES CHANGES: SOFT SPACES FOR BETTER ADDRESSING CHALLENGING TERRITORIAL ISSUES IN THE LAZIO REGION<sup>1</sup> (1124)

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**Abstract.** Based on longstanding research conducted in the Lazio Region about the implementation of two recent and innovative territorial policies, this contribution reflects on those findings by shedding light on the connection between administrative/not administrative boundaries and efficiency in the goals achievement. The analysis provides insights and prompts a reconsideration of the approaches taken in defining these new soft spaces for better addressing challenging territorial issues.

**Keywords:** boundaries, variable perimeters, innovative territorial planning tools, soft spaces.

### 1. Introduction

While tracing borders remain crucial aspects of urban and regional planning (Gaeta, Rivolin, and Mazza, 2013), the concept of territorial boundaries in planning practices has evolved significantly. In recent decades, the discussion about boundaries in planning policies has shifted towards the need to transcend rigid and inadequate administrative perimeters in response to contemporary urban and territorial challenges. Consequently, in pursuit of more effective territorial transformations, planners have embraced alternative policies perimeters beyond the traditional planning framework at the city, province, and regional levels. Along this, integrated territorial tools have facilitate to build connections among ecosystems, settled communities, stakeholders, and territorial resources (Peano, 2000; Gambino, 2003; Ferrara, 2006). This has given rise to various distinct territorial entities, accompanied by innovative planning tools and policies that seek to define boundaries through bottom-up or negotiating processes, often driven by specific objectives and available resources (Lovell, 2002; Bixler, 2014).

In this framework, the 'Alta Tuscia-Antica città di Castro' Inner Area, as part of the SNAI-Italian Inner Area National Strategy, and the 'Marta-Bolsena-Tarquini' River, Lake, and

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<sup>1</sup>The paper is the result of shared research work. However, for practical reasons, it is possible to attribute to Daniela De Leo, §1, §2, §4; and to Sara Altamore §2, §3; §4.

Coast Contract serve as two useful examples of voluntary territorial planning tools and policies. These are characterized by: a) the selection of the most operative and functional boundaries, b) the aim to establish new territorial relationships, dynamics, and connections. Nonetheless, the analysis presented in this paper reveals that despite the potential these new 'soft spaces' to foster more effective transformations, they have faced challenges in practice due to the prevailing traditional administrative approach at the Municipality level.

In summary, the purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims to stimulate critical discussions about perimeters in territorial planning. Secondly, it offers suggestions to enhance the functionality of these 'soft spaces' for innovating planning policies.

The paper is structured into three paragraphs. The first paragraph introduces the selected theoretical framework. The second focuses on the processes of the two policies within a 'soft space' area in the Lazio Region. Lastly, the third presents the findings and conclusions of the study.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

It is widely acknowledged that administrative boundaries often fall short of capturing the interconnected nature of social, economic, and environmental processes that transcend these boundaries. The recognition of ecosystems and landscapes as essential elements have challenged the traditional understanding of administrative boundaries (Magnaghi, 2018). Thus, the growing recognition of environmental challenges has driven the development of planning tools that prioritize interaction, adaptability, and the generation of knowledge (Ali, 2003; Hage et al., 2010; Evans, 2011). That needed a sight towards more integrated approaches to defining policies perimeters that align with ecological systems and functions. This shift is particularly evident in the field of environmental management, where planners have progressively moved away from traditional approaches (Healey and Shaw, 1994; Schoeman et al., 2014). Starting from a renovated environmental planning perspective, the importance of continuity and interdependence of ecosystems and landscapes has been raised. Within this context, planning processes have embraced the notions of complexity and uncertainty, recognizing the interconnectedness between societies, economies, and the environment spanning across multiple administrative boundaries (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2011).

Not only according to Italian law, the administrative perimeters of cities, provinces, and regions determine the spatial extent to which specific planning tools and policies apply. Alongside this, the recognition of negotiable perimeters in planning practices, as opposed to traditionally adopted administrative ones, has prompted various attempts to conceptualize the boundaries as open, porous, and other forms (Secchi and Viganò,

2011; Paasi and Zimmerbauer, 2016; Jones, 2022). Moreover, the endeavour to interpret policies' perimeter in a relational way remains a complex and crucial challenge, intricately connected to innovations in governance dynamics (Ayres and Stafford, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the issue of boundaries in territorial planning includes the related topic of administrative efficiency and the need for more collaborative approaches to address complex spatial challenges. As well as it demands a distinct awareness of the spatial scale, interconnections, and issues dynamics, as well as the active involvement of various stakeholders within the planning process. These approaches involve bottom-up participation and the consideration of diverse stakeholder interests. They seek to foster more inclusive planning processes (Born and Purcell, 2006; Selman, 2006; Mendes, 2007).

In this context, the proposed concept of 'soft spaces' (Haughton et al., 2009) refers to the creation of dynamic and differently connected areas where planning plays an increasingly important role in integrating the related new 'soft' institutional spaces of governance (Allmendinger et al., 2015). However, since these tools are often linked to specific, contingent projects or are driven by time-bound economic interests (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Paasi and Zimmerbauer, 2016), there is a risk that the newly formed territorial entities may not be effectively activated.

Nevertheless, soft spaces of governance are increasing in number and significance within the institutional framework of spatial planning. The concept of 'soft spaces' alongside the traditional 'hard spaces' has led to several key observations (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2008):

- Soft spaces are intentionally introduced to provide new opportunities for innovative thinking, especially in areas where public engagement and cross-sector consultation face resistance, hindering the progress of new development.
- The interplay between 'hard' and 'soft' spaces of governance is essential, as they rely on each other. The goal is not to replace existing 'hard' institutional spaces with new 'soft' ones, but rather to create complementary and sometimes competing avenues for development at sub-regional or sub-local government levels.
- Soft spaces often exhibit a deliberately adaptable nature, allowing them to be easily adjusted and shaped to accommodate different interests and challenges.

The creation of soft spaces is a rising trend in implementing multilevel interventions characterized by multiple, non-unidirectional relationships. However, as noted, it is crucial to recognize that the relationships shape the dynamics of power and knowledge within the institutional structures and dynamics (Kronsell and Mukhtar-Landgren, 2018). Furthermore, it is related to the creation of processes across scales and domains, that have to deal both with well-established and emerging boundaries.

### 3. Two Examples Of Soft Spaces In The Lazio Region

The study area is located between the province of Viterbo and the regions of Tuscany and Umbria. Within this area, two voluntary policies and tools have been implemented, partially overlapping with each other. These two policies and tools have distinct (yet interconnected) objectives<sup>2</sup>, resulting in the emergence of two different types of soft spaces.

The SNAI-Italian National Strategy for the Inner Area is a nationwide strategy designed to address and reverse the trend of abandonment in peripheral areas. Established in 2013, the policy provides central guidance and monitoring, coordinated by the Department for Cohesion Policies<sup>3</sup> and is responsible for selecting areas, defining strategies, and monitoring progress. It also establishes local management units to drive systemic government reform. The policy identified 72 pilot-project areas with historically demonstrated self-organizing capabilities. That corresponded to the redefinition of 72 new perimeters<sup>4</sup>. In the area of Tuscia, the 'Alta Tuscia-Antica città di Castro' Inner Area defined a new perimeter composed of 19 municipalities<sup>5</sup>.

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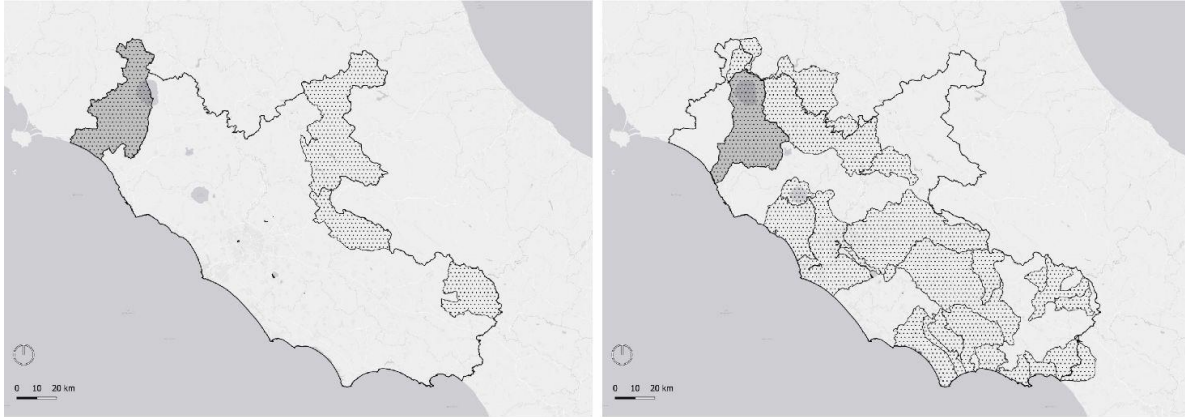
<sup>2</sup> Further exploration of the two policies can be undertaken reading the second contribution of the two authors in Track 7 'Planning for Resilience: Territories, Communities and Environment' of this book of proceedings.

<sup>3</sup> The central guidance is facilitated through the institution of the Technical National Committee for Inner Areas (CTAI).

<sup>4</sup> These areas are selected based on their historical association and serve as a prerequisite for establishing a long-term partnership. Indeed, they must have demonstrated that they manage at least two fundamental functions in an associated manner. The SNAI adopted an integrated approach to address demographic challenges and meet the needs of territories with significant disadvantages.

<sup>5</sup> In addition, the process involved various public and private actors, including the municipalities in the Inner Area, the National Energy Authority (ENEL), the Local Health Authority of Viterbo, regional school offices, and educational institutions such as the University of Tuscia.

Similarly, River Contracts are a form of voluntary cooperation implementing European directives and guidelines to achieve integrated water management beyond sectoral plans<sup>6</sup>. These contracts serve as a tool for experimenting with alternative territorial



The four Inner Areas in the Lazio Region and the Area of “Alta Tuscia-Antica città di Castro”

The twenty-one River Contracts in Lazio Region and the “Bolsena-Marta-Tarquinia” Lake, River, and Coast Contract

dynamics through participatory processes involving various actors, including non-institutional ones, and citizens at different levels of planning. The contract perimeter extends beyond administrative boundaries, encompassing the entire hydrographic basin<sup>7</sup>. The 'Marta-Bolsena-Tarquinia' River, Lake, and Coast Contract defined a perimeter that does not correspond to any administrative boundaries but includes three different water bodies: river, lake, and coast.

Figure 1. The perimeters of the two policies in the Lazio Region

Source: elaborated by the authors

The whole area involved in these two processes comprises small and intermediate cities with an increasing depopulation and rapid ageing of the community. These cities, with populations slightly exceeding 5,000 inhabitants, are facing depopulation and

<sup>6</sup> The implementation of River Contracts in Italy began in 2007 with the establishment of the National Round Table of River Contracts

<sup>7</sup> In 2015, the Lazio Region formally became a part of the National Charter for the River Contracts. In 2017, the Region, in collaboration with the University of Tuscia, engaged in discussions with the mayors of the municipalities situated around Lake Bolsena. The initial proponents of the project were the municipalities close to the lake. In December 2017, the first signing involved: 7 public bodies, including the Province of Viterbo, 3 trade associations, 1 agricultural company, and 10 civil associations. Later in the creation of the Lake, River, and Coast Contract, 6 municipalities, 3 labour unions, 8 new associations, 3 additional trade associations, 5 private citizens, one Local Action Group, the Local Health District of Viterbo, and the authors' University joined.

abandonment, while others are affected by environmental risks (floods, landslides and pollution among the most prevalent)<sup>8</sup>.

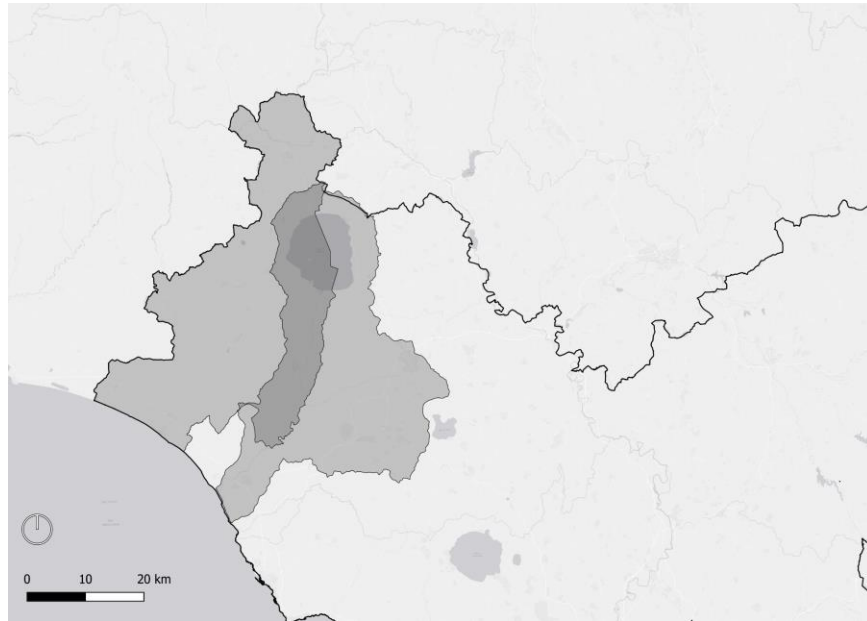


Figure 2. The overlapping of the two policies perimeters  
Source: elaborated by the authors.

The territorial research carried out on the two processes<sup>9</sup> highlighted the limits of this softness.

From one side, the SNAI policy encouraged the overcoming of administrative boundaries, effectively creating soft spaces within the perimeter of the defined Inner Area, building a common vision and associating technical and administrative functions (usually performed within 'hard spaces'). In the effort to create an effective perimeter for the implementation process, some municipalities were excluded, leading to a boundary that disrupts certain territorial continuities (such as, for example, Lake Bolsena).

The municipalities within the 'Alta Tuscia-Antica città di Castro' Inner Area have entered into an agreement with the shared vision of creating a 'polycentric city'. This vision is entrusted to the associating function of planning. To facilitate the process of associationism, the Strategy Document emphasizes the need for a gradual approach that promotes a cultural shift. It recognizes that through collective decision-making and collaborative action, there is a greater ability to enact change, gain influence, benefit

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<sup>8</sup> For more information see: Trigila et alii, 2021 and the Strategy document of Alta Tuscia Antica città di Castro, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> For details about the research method see De Leo and Altamore, 2022; 2023.

from economies of scale, and ultimately achieve improved outcomes.<sup>10</sup> However, difficulties have emerged in implementing joint planning efforts. In the case of land use and territorial planning, soft space has proven ineffective because mayors tend to revert to their usual hard space. From the interviews, one of the reasons highlighted concerns the fear of losing decision-making - and therefore political - power over municipal space.

On the other side, the contract boundaries were defined based on the hydrological basin even though the institutional representatives, including the Province and the 12 Municipalities involved remained strictly anchored to their existing administrative boundaries. As a result, participants in the process highlighted the lack of active involvement of local institutions in the collaborative process, despite significant changes occurring in both internal and external relationships. Furthermore, the fieldwork revealed challenges in collaboration not only between institutional levels but also between institutions and citizens. From the interviews and observatory participation, local institutions primarily attended essential meetings and showed minimal involvement in the participatory process. At the same time, the low level of citizen participation emphasized the need for institutions to fulfil their role as active participants in the process. This lack of structured engagement hindered the potential for learning processes and networking opportunities. Consequently, coordination and collaboration skills were primarily concentrated in external individuals such as project managers, visionary retirees, and representatives from the third sector, rather than being developed and shared as a collective public asset. This diminished the potential impact of soft spaces, rendering them uncertain and aleatoric.

#### **4. Findings And Conclusions**

The long-standing research behind this paper has shed light on how the 'Alta Tuscia-Antica città di Castro' policy – within one of the 72 inner areas' national perimeter – attempted to define a new boundary for the area involved in the strategy design as a whole. However, municipalities were unable to overcome the administrative boundaries to address shared urban issues. In this case, the new boundary of the Inner Area resulted in the risk of isolating the area from its surroundings.

In the case of the Contract, although the water basin challenged the single administrative municipal boundaries, it did not effectively establish a new space of practice. Despite the new soft boundary was defined and recognized by the Region,

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<sup>10</sup> Here, the text translates the meaning of a sentence from the Strategy Document. In Italian: «un percorso educativo lento che presuppone un cambio culturale per comprendere che nel decidere e nell'agire insieme si acquista maggiore capacità di azione e di potere, si creano economie di scala, si ottengono migliori risultati» (Strategia 'Alta Tuscia-Antica città di Castro': 32).

stakeholders did not fully recognize it. Consequently, there was limited capacity for action, and then the voluntary instrument was largely ineffective.

Nonetheless, the conceptual framework of soft spaces offered suggestions for reinforcing the voluntary tool's efficiency by considering that:

- new boundaries need to be used intentionally for providing new opportunities for innovative thinking and public engagement, by structuring permanent learning and training processes for all the actors involved (administrators, institutions, project manager, etc) enhancing their skillset by spreading knowledge and sharing responsibilities,
- the interplay between 'hard' and 'soft' boundaries must create a stable local network based on mixed actors with heterogeneous skills at different levels, so being effective/efficient by avoiding concentration of knowledge and power,
- soft boundaries often exhibit a deliberately adaptable nature even though institutional participants have to learn to consider territorial planning as a shared practice among different local institutions and with inhabitants and associations, and not a private domain.

In conclusion, the creation of soft boundaries through voluntary spatial planning tools can be effective only when multilevel interventions are implemented, fostering multiple relationships. These interventions recognize the interconnectedness and interdependence of different actors and institutions involved in the planning process. However, achieving this requires reshaping the distribution of power and knowledge within institutional and administrative structures and boundaries.

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