THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS ON CITY — REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN FLANDERS

An assessment of spatial programs in the urban region of Ghent

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Introduction
The governance of city – regional areas is, without doubt, one of the best examples of what in literature is called ‘wicked problems’ (Head 2008). There is no agreement on the policy problems that are at stake, nor is there any agreement on the way to tackle societal problems at this scale. Elaborating policies at the city – regional level leads to never ending power play between the city and the surrounding municipalities, between local and central government, between public and private actors, across several policy sectors involved, all with their own institutional features.

In many countries this city – regional wickedness has led and still leads to longstanding discussions about the redesign of governmental systems, mostly focused on the discussion whether or not to establish a city – regional government structure, either based on updated forms of intermunicipal cooperation or on the creation of a supralocal government, in a variety of types related to different forms of involvement of local governments (Balducci 2003, Levelt 2013). France has been relatively successful by the creation of ‘communautés de ville’, now called ‘metropoles’ for a city-regional area, typically covering the territories of one big and many small local governments. In other countries, such as the Netherlands, the UK or Germany, similar discussions were much less successful but city – regional policies still are considered to be of the utmost importance. This is the case because the governance of city-regional areas is also considered part of the solution to other wicked problems, like more sustainable economic development, more intelligent mobility, a better quality of life, ...(Suo, Shen et al 2018, Tosics 2004)

Spatial planning and topics related to spatial problems are at the core of this city – regional debate. The meta question is how to realise policies that match the catchment area of public services and how to cope with policies based on distribution and redistribution of public goods at the scale of the ‘daily urban system’, for instance for housing policies, infrastructural policies, traffic and mobility policies (Tosics 2011, Salet 2003)? One basic problem is the permanent misfit between the city – regional scale and the scales on which traditional governments are organised (Cox 2010), causing competition between local governments (Harisson 2007). Another basic problem is the ownership: who ‘owns’ the city – region and who takes the lead to elaborate relevant policies (Bentley 2017), resulting in competition between local and central government and between several policy sectors (e.g. spatial planning, road infrastructure, nature and green development).

Those topics and those related discussions are also at stake in the Flanders region, the very dense populated northern part of Belgium, where urban sprawl has been a historical spatial characteristic and where the strong reinforcement of the urban sprawl has been the result of a specific spatial planning system since World War II. Due to an anti – urban regime fuelled mainly by the catholic party,
local governments have been encouraged to realise housing development all over the area and people have been financially and fiscally encouraged to build houses in their small hometowns, commuting to the cities where they work, where the most important cultural infrastructure is situated, where hospitals are located, where in general the daily urban system generates a lot of traffic and traffic congestion. The negative effects of this policy practice in the past decades are increasingly demonstrated: the cost of public infrastructure following the urban sprawl is extremely high and no longer affordable, according to many experts (Geuting 2017, Engelen 2016). This makes policy making at the city – regional scale more relevant than ever and it places this scale at the forefront of the transition policy towards more sustainable urban systems.

The daily urban systems in the Flanders region consist mainly of the impact of the super city region of Brussels, literally in the heart of the Belgian country, and 13 smaller city – regions of which the region of Ghent, with approximately 500,000 inhabitants and 11 local governments (depending on the delineation of the area) surrounding the city of Ghent (with approx. 260,000 inhabitants) is one of the most important.

Figure 1: Region of Flanders with 13 regional cities. (the city region of Ghent in yellow)

In many policy documents of the outgoing Flemish government (a new government coalition is currently being negotiated), the existence of the ‘city regional problem’ and the need for a more effective ‘city regional policy’ had been widely recognized. Spatial planning is at the heart of all those considerations, combined with the immense problem of mobility and traffic generated by the urban sprawl. The sustainability agenda explains why those problems are at the policy agenda now, but the arguments are also more pragmatically inspired: an increasing number of studies demonstrate that the cost of the continuation of the urban sprawl exceeds by far the cost of changing the dominant
regime towards a spatial planning based on densification, selective planning and development of well-equipped zones for public transport, concentration of public services in order to improve efficiency and save public money (Stec group 2018, VITO 2019).

This shifting policy agenda however develops within the existing system of ‘hard spaces’ (Metzger & Schmitt 2012): the institutionalized formal competences for spatial planning, for mobility, for housing are divided over the traditional territorial spheres of local, provincial and central government (in this case the Flemish government). Local government has an important formal authority for spatial plans and due to a traditional system of ’political localism’ the influence of local governments, using their party-political connections to the central government, is huge and explains why attempts to elaborate city-regional policies by the central government are blocked or even never considered seriously (Voets and De Rynck 2008, Wayenberg 2005) and why, if any attempts do develop, they often fail in the phase of implementation or remain nothing more than official papers, announcing a change of the regime but without any impact on the daily decisions of central and local governments. For example, a few years ago the outgoing Flemish government announced the so-called ‘concrete stop’ (betonstop), stating that the use of open space for building purposes should be stopped. But this ‘policy by announcement’ clearly trying to change traditional policies in the daily urban system to allow uncontrolled urban sprawl, has never been followed by a real change of policy decisions. So far, the main impact was and is that private developers and local governments speeded up their plans to realize new spatial projects, achieving the opposite of what the government announced.

However, such struggles at the central level does not mean that the city-regional area is an empty zone from a policy perspective. The Ghent city regional area discussed in this paper demonstrates so interesting ‘governance arrangements at the city-regional scale or at parts of the area, bringing together different sets of partners in specific projects which are part of the city-regional agenda. Those governance arrangements do not cover the whole urban system but focus on specific spatial projects or programs. There is a clear rise of such programs in the Flanders region, partly stimulated by the central government, partly generated by bottom-up initiatives (Temmerman, De Rynck and Voets 2017, Wayenberg 2012).

This brings us to the core research questions discussed in the remainder of this paper. What is the impact of those governance settings on city-regional policies? Can those governance settings contribute to more effective city-regional policy making? How do those governance settings have an impact, if any, on political decisions in the existing government organization? How to assess the impact of these governance settings, bringing together public and private partners in an attempt to combine policy resources in frameworks that could be described as horizontal (interactions between local
governments), vertical (interactions between local and central level) and diagonal (interactions between institutionalized policy sectors such as spatial planning, mobility, housing, social policies,...)?

In the following section, the conceptual framework to deal with these questions is discussed. In the next sections, the methodology and cases of interesting governance arrangements in the Ghent city-regional area are discussed. The paper is concluded with a discussion of the main insights drawn from the empirical study.

1 Collaborative networks and soft spaces: the conceptual framework

European states are confronted with a number of societal challenges leading to increased levels of complexity and (inter-)dependency (Klijn and Koppenjan 2015) and the city – regional problems are certainly high on this complexity agenda (Healey 2006). One way to respond to this phenomenon is through the creation of collaborative networks between different governmental units and public-private partnerships (Pierre and Peters 2005). This strategy differs from that of changing the institutional or hard framework of scales for the basic organisation of government, elections, competences and financial resources. The crucial question then is how those networks ultimately relates to and impacts the decisions in the institutionalized world.

Over the past thirty years there has been a proliferation of new territorial forms in many countries which illustrate these types of governmental collaboration, especially in the spheres of spatial planning, urban regeneration and environmental policy, characterised by some authors as so-called ‘soft spaces’ (Allmendinger, Haughton et al. 2009). They are examples of those collaborative networks. At first sight, our Ghent cases correspond to this trend: we will describe below several multi – actor settings related to specific spatial topics. It remains to see if they correspond to what is called ‘soft planning’ or how they are related to the ‘soft planning’ – concept.

A key characteristic of these arrangements is the complexity and multitude of administrative issues and challenges to be tackled. Often it involves cooperation between a vertical network of state actors, intersecting with horizontal networks consisting out of municipal, private and civic actors, creating hybrid, multi-layered structures (Peck, Theodore et al. 2009). Therefore a combination of top-down decision making and bottom up dynamics is said to be established, offering various means of formal and informal ways of cooperation and different balances between top – down plans, central incentives or central imperatives and bottom – up ideas, dynamics and leadership. So the city – regional area seems to be the forum for several but also different and partly intersecting governance networks with different balances between the types of actors.
A lot of these planning activities and arrangements under the heading of ‘soft planning’ have in common that they take place outside the statutory planning system that remains in function and continues to take daily decisions. They try to establish a new framing of the area by exploring new futures, by elaborating inspiring projects and plans. The scale on which they are developed is no fixed scale in the institutional sense. Of course, the selection of network partners is based on a functional territorial delineation useful to organize meetings and to select the involved partners, but the scale can be changed and interpreted flexible if necessary. There is a big difference between the permanently institutionalized scales that serve as the fixed territorial framework for the organisation of politics and elections and the temporarily created spaces as working areas for the governance networks.

A common denominator for soft space activities and processes is that they are the result of hybrid and multi – jurisdictional governance processes, bringing together actors from a variety of spheres into new networks (Bevir 2011, Denters, Goldsmith et al. 2014). They refer to informal, or non-statutory planning activities, that exist alongside to the spaces and scales of elected government bodies like local, regional or national government. Metzger and Schmitt (2012, 265) define soft spaces as “the informal or semiformal, non-statutory spatiality’s of planning with associations and relations stretching both across formally established boundaries and scalar levels of planning and across previously entrenched sectoral divides”. ‘Informal, semiformal, non – statutory activities’ here are the key words, but also ‘stretching across formally established boundaries’.

To grasp the specific nature of the soft space concept, soft spaces are often being counter posed to the ‘hard’, territorial spaces of regulation, where bounded jurisdictions are linked to hierarchical scales of decision making through accountability structures, political hierarchy and regulation processes. Soft spaces have been discussed as strategies to break away from the constraints associated with these formal scales of statutory planning (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009). This counter position is interesting but can also be questioned: in settings of clear ‘soft planning’, institutionalised actors part of the political hierarchy also participate in the governance networks. So even if we only look at the composition of the governance networks, the counter position does not seem to be very realistic.

While both concepts are often being placed in opposition to each other, it is also acknowledged that hard and soft planning both need each other. Rather than a hard division, the concept has proven to be useful as an analytical concept, highlighting the transition from hard to soft spaces and vice versa, examining the range of possible forms of interplay and how they relate to each other in different contexts (Haughton and Allmendinger 2013). This is also our position and guideline for the case analysis.
reported in this paper: how do those soft space planning activities relate to the hard world of institutionalized power?

Othengrafen et al (2015) distinguishes two main rationalities in the use of soft spaces. A first one describes soft spaces as a response to new needs and challenges, for instance functional geographies and environmental issues which do not fit within the existing political-administrative boundaries. Soft spaces are in this context conceived as a functional or pragmatist solution for ‘getting things done’, which wouldn’t have been able at the local or regional level.

By better representing functional areas and through the involvement of all relevant actors, complex policy problems can be tackled that cannot be dealt with by single (public) actors. Public actors can therefore extend their limited powers outside the formalised planning system by overcoming fragmented political geographies and by building up regional institutional capacity.

The second rationality relates to the use of soft spaces to develop and project alternative visionary futures for an area. Soft spaces therefore become part of a strategy of the disruption of existing spaces and processes. In many cases these processes are also exercises at re-branding, shifting perceptions from actual (economic or societal) dysfunctions towards a more positive imaginary. Common discursive frames in this strategy are the goals of institutional capacity building by overcoming sectoral and administrative boundaries, in need of becoming more permeable in the future, and to coordinate public and private sector investment.

Soft spaces are said to emerge as a result and a combination of top-down- impulses and voluntary bottom-up processes, some of them indicating a transition from one pole (top down) to another (bottom – up). Soft spaces can also emerge in reaction to reforms of local or regional government initiated by central government. Although soft spaces focus strongly on new constellations of actors coming together, the frequent importance of already established networks should not be disregarded. Soft spaces can also emerge in ‘the shadow of hierarchy’, where de facto central public actors have the power to influence the decisions of other actors.

A third identified driver in the literature on soft spaces is the ongoing process of neoliberalisation (Leitner and Sheppard 2002, Peck, Theodore et al. 2010, Brennetot 2017). The pursuit of economic growth and the ideology of market logic results in a competitive localism for government. The idea of simply allocating land by urban planners, ‘waiting’ for development, got replaced by a proactive stand, aimed towards promoting economic growth. Soft spaces are therefore seen as arenas where planners and other relevant stakeholders come together to put market-driven neoliberal principles into practice. New growth-oriented approaches are therefore developed leading towards cross-border cooperation and territorial rescaling through regional partnerships and strategies.
The impact of soft spaces

Specifically for city-regions, conceived as the daily urban systems, soft spaces are said to be successful in creating new spatial imaginaries, allowing to generate new ideas about functional spaces or visionary future developments (Brenner 2004, Moisio and Jonas 2018). These imaginaries can help to overcome rivalries and competition between urban and rural areas. A lot of these imaginaries have however remained limited to the discursive level, only leading towards limited impacts and actions at the local level (Othengrafen, Knieling et al. 2015). In this way soft space can also lead to a marginalisation of certain activities, providing only coordination and cooperation at the level of discourse without concrete consequences, despite the rhetoric of inclusiveness and greater policy integration. Therefore we will analyse the whole policy cycle and not only the planning phase of the reframing and the creative imagination of new area perspectives in this study. What is the real effectiveness of those types of governance networks? As we will demonstrate, the analysis of the implementation is essential to grasp the opportunities but also the possible weaknesses of the governance networks in settings of soft planning. Networking is much more than organising creative labs where brilliant new territorial frames are created and ideas are formulated in a sphere of quasi (but mainly rhetorical) consensus between the involved partners, often without any impact on the hard world of daily decisions.

Because soft space necessarily co-exists or draws legitimacy from their relation towards ‘hard’, statutory planning, the relationship between both sides of planning can create quite some tensions. Othengrafen et al (2015) distinguishes three types of positions between hard and soft spaces regarding accountability and legitimacy. A first type concerns a consciousness regarding the impact of soft spaces upon accountability, ensuring a strong link towards hard space where the democratic process is situated. Soft spaces which are conceived as instruments to overcome the difficulties associated with statutory planning are said to have a stronger sensitivity towards transparency and democratic legitimacy. A second type concerns soft spaces that were conscious regarding issues of accountability but were less concerned with the consequences, therefore no direct link was established. This category applies to soft spaces aimed at integrating and coordinating different spatial strategies, which is in itself already a more political process. A third type refers to soft spaces where direct accountability and linkage towards hard space is to be avoided, for example due to a strong involvement and lead by private actors. This position comes close to the neoliberal agenda discussed earlier. The three types lead to three positions related to accountability and democracy. It goes from strengthening the democratic debate in the first type to avoid traditional accountability procedures in the representative democracy in the third one.
Also on this point some critical remarks on this perspective in literature are needed. The impact of the three positions is also dependent on the composition of the governance networks. In most cases representatives of the government levels involved take part in the network of the ‘soft spaces’, at least that is what we see as the dominant practice in the Flemish cases. So the discussion about democracy is not only about the impact of the networking but is also related to the roles those representatives themselves play in those networks.

2 Methodology
Through a series of elite interviews with key stakeholders and by building upon previous research (De Rynck & Voets 2005, Voets 2008) an assessment of the four most relevant governance networks in the city – region of Ghent will be presented in this paper using a qualitative research strategy. So we examine four cases in the same city – region, which makes it possible to look for interactions between the four cases.

Eleven key actors were approached for an interview. We used in-depth interviews to determine the interviewees perceptions of what had been achieved during the process, the role and impact of the main actors, the use of instruments and the relationship between different levels of government. The interviews themselves took globally between 1,5 and 2 hours. Statements during interviews were cross-checked and supplemented with information from other interviewees, policy documents and previous research.

For one specific case (Regionetwerk Gent) we assisted several project meetings as a form of participatory observation, which provided a real-life addition to the analysis of policy documents and interviews.
3 The case of Ghent and the Flanders region

3.1 General description and background

Ghent is the second largest Flemish city with approximately 260,000 inhabitants and it is growing fast, an important aspect of our case and a crucial part of the framing of the city – regional constellation. Part of the framing is the pressure that can be expected on the housing market and the impact on the environment and on the mobility problem, which is already urgent. Ghent is surrounded by 11 local governments which are economically and socially quite dependent of the city for a range of urban services and facilities. The whole Ghent area, based on commuting and the daily urban system involves approximately 550,000 inhabitants.

We briefly illustrate some of the basic socio-geographical features of the Ghent region on the maps below. The city of Ghent functions as a strong growth and attraction pole for regional employment (figure 2), giving rise to high mobility flows towards the agglomeration which puts the core city under a strong pressure. Also, a strong and selective migration (of mainly middle class families) from the city towards the suburbs is observed, affecting the tax base of the city and leading towards urban sprawl (figure 4 and figure 3). This goes hand in hand with a growing social and poverty gap between Ghent and its surrounding municipalities (figure 5).
Figure 2: Commuting towards agglomeration of Ghent

Figure 3: Built-up area in the Ghent region

Figure 4: Migration from Ghent towards the surrounding municipalities

Figure 5: Poverty evolution in the Ghent region
Local governments surrounding Ghent have an average of around 18,000 inhabitants, the smallest outlier being 7,500 inhabitants (Wachtebeke). Ghent was and is dominated traditionally by a leftist government, while in most small municipalities a more right-wing government is in power.

Important sub-regional actors in the area are:

- The Flemish government itself, holding the main competences for spatial planning, housing, public transport and mobility, environment and regional aspects of economic policy.

- The Province of East – Flanders as a directly elected provincial government with its own council and executive body, and a governor as an appointed public official by the Flemish government acting on behalf of that government.

- Veneco as an organization for intermunicipal cooperation concerning spatial planning and infrastructure for 21 municipalities in the larger Ghent region (without Ghent). Veneco supports intermunicipal cooperation for its partners, providing primarily services to its partners to strengthen local capacity and support in the elaboration of local spatial planning initiatives.

An overall delineation which contains and converges for all planning activities in the Ghent region does not exist, apart from the regional planning zone (1977) that we describe below. Recently however the Flemish government created the ‘vervoerregio’ (transport region) that encloses the most relevant parts of the city – area. That is an interesting new development, that is being set up now, but the transport region is only responsible for mobility planning, but not for spatial planning. The transport region is composed of local governments and representatives of the Flemish department and agencies for public infrastructure and public transport. This is a clear example of a functional organisation, part of the sectoral approach of the Flemish government.

Figure 6: Transport regions in Flanders (Ghent region in pink colour)
Scale is largely dependent on the functional urban area or the spatial issue to which spatial programs are being addressed. Each planning initiative in our cases therefore creates their own functional areas, upon which relevant stakeholders are brought together.

A first benchmark in the institutional history of spatial planning for the Ghent region (see map below) was the adoption of the regional zoning plan ‘Ghent and the canal area’ in 1977 by the central government.

Figure 7 (Left): Regional zoning plan ‘Gentse en kanaalzone’ 1997
Figure 8 (Right): administrative borders of the participating municipalities (Assenede, Destelbergen, De Pinte, Evergem, Ghent, Laarne, Lochristi, Lovendegem, Melle, Merelbeke, Moerbeke, Nevele, Oosterzele, Sint-Martens-Latem, Wachtebeke, Wetteren and Zelzate)

The regional zoning plan offered a large reserve of building land, inspired by social objectives regarding cheap housing facilities and based on a strong autonomous suburban development. The plan serves as a first example of statutory ‘hard’ planning of the area, although the reconstruction of the elaboration of the regional zoning plan showed that this was the result of a long networked process of consultation and influencing through central-local and local–local relations (Cabus 1985). The regional zoning plan was clearly the result of a collaborative network (even if setting up such a network was not a goal), combining local and central governments and important private organizations, united in a concept of economic growth, infrastructural development and spatial planning that fitted into the dominant concepts of that time. Sustainability was not yet part of the agenda in that period... That was the frame of that time and that frame has been inspired by spatial planners and consultants that prepared the regional zoning plan and inspired the political discussions by their framing, their scenarios
and their data. At that time, that was considered as a creative planning phase based on one dominant frame of growth in the classical economic sense.

That old regional plan is still very important today. It is still a hard legal basis for local governments to decide on permits, e.g. to realize new housing projects. So the regional zoning plan of the Ghent region is still the default framework, unless it gets overruled by specific spatial implementation plans, established by one of the elected tiers of government (local, provincial or Flemish level). The regional zoning plan still gives local governments plenty of opportunities to start new developments, consuming more open space and encouraging people to move to that local government, often people who lived earlier in Ghent and now want to move to a bigger house in a more open and green environment. So it still serves as a basis for intermunicipal competition to attract citizens.

The criticism on the regional zoning plan, initially conceived as a guidance plan but which finally resulted in a juridical zoning plan, gave rise to the elaboration of the Flemish spatial policy plan (RSV) in 1997. The RSV provided new spatial imaginaries ("Flanders: open and urban") and a new legislative framework, where both visionary and implementation plans are drawn up at the three elected tiers of government (Flemish, provincial, local). This was a change of the hard framework of the competencies in the planning system of the three traditional government levels (municipal, provincial, central = Flemish government).

The provinces are competent for only some specific matters that go beyond the local municipal interest and performs supportive tasks for other governments. Also they provide different forms of territory-based cooperation between different partners (local authorities, private organizations, Flemish government, etc.). Finally, they manage certain waterways, provincial business parks, delineation of small urban areas, recreational domains, nature areas, etc.

The Flemish government holds the most important competences in many policy fields, e.g. regional economic and spatial policy, bus and tram transportation, delineation of the most important urban areas called metropolitan and regional urban areas, road infrastructure and the organisation of the lower tiers of government. The delineation of the Ghent metropolitan area is therefore a competence of the Flemish government.

Although this new type of ‘structure planning’ did provide a shift towards strengthening a more urban development, a strong path dependency regarding decisions from the past was also noted, leading towards strong tendencies to consolidate plan forms in legal terms, and a lack of orientation towards implementation (Voets, De Peuter et al 2010). We mentioned already that the regional zoning plan remains active until specific spatial plans modify the regional zoning plan. For important parts of the city – regional area therefore the regional zoning plan still is the dominant legal framework. Every new
planning process, be it soft or hard, has to position itself towards the zoning of spaces in the regional zoning plan. If the planning process leads to other choices than those integrated in the regional zoning plan, the regional zone plan first has to be changed and for important topics, this is a decision of the central Flemish government. For more detailed changes a decision of the local government is needed.

In 2018, a new spatial policy plan (BRV = Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen) got adopted by the Flemish government, formulating the ambition to stop consuming open space for construction by 2040. However, no concrete binding commitments were taken so far to implement these visionary goals. Concerning land-use policy, recent changes seem to strengthen the already existed trends towards decentralization of competences towards the provincial and local level. Contrary to the RSV, the city-regional level is no longer recognized as a spatial reality by the new spatial policy plan and the Flemish government doesn’t provide any specific instruments to act upon the latter.

As a result, city-regional planning initiatives seem to become less legitimate without a Flemish framework and therefore need to be elaborated solely on the basis of bottom-up initiatives. This is a much less favourable starting position for the establishment of planning processes at the city – regional level.

The four cases in the city-region of Ghent are discussed next. We look at the triggers, the process, the relevant actors, the outcomes, the critical factors in the networking, the dynamics in the local – central relations and the interaction between hard and soft spaces.

3.2 Case 1: The delineation process of the urban region of Ghent (DP-URG)

Figure 9: Focus area ‘DP-URG’
**Description**

The DP-URG (started in 1999 and established in 2005) was a process of visioning in collaboration between the three levels of government: the Flemish government, the Province of East-Flanders and the surrounding municipalities of Evergem, De Pinte, Destelbergen, Ghent, Melle, Merelbeke, Lochristi and Sint-Martens-Latem, in consultation processes with the policy sectors involved and with various social groups.

The Flemish government, specifically the spatial planning department, was the initiator and responsible for the course of the process and the adoption of the final plan. The delineation process served as an instrument and implementation tool of the Flemish spatial policy plan. The aim was to delineate all the urban regions in Flanders to enable a distinct urban policy in those regions. To do so, each urban region should be defined in a spatial implementation plan (consisting of a vision, borderline, and action programme).

The DP-URG followed a fixed structure, set of steps and policy products defined in the RSV. The DP-URG first mapped the existing spatial situation, developed the themes of housing and economic activity, and bordering elements. By doing this, the Flemish spatial planning department wanted to strengthen the living and working quality of urban areas by realising targets regarding housing, commercial activities, metropolitan functions and green areas.

Specifically, the process format included a project team, a consultation group, information meetings and newsletters for a wider audience. A group of consultants, administrative and administrative delegates from the three levels of government and the commissioners of the municipal structural plans were members of the project team. The consultation group consisted of a limited delegation of the project team, official representatives of the organized population at the metropolitan level (social actors and interest groups).

**Analysis**

Initially, the surrounding municipalities did not want to be part of the urban region of Ghent, because they feared that the city of Ghent was trying to expand its influence and perceived the process as a prelude to a future amalgamation. Their criticism accommodated unrest of their population, but was also used strategically to obtain a better position during negotiations. In the end, the municipalities agreed to cooperate because the process also provided opportunities to achieve some of their goals that they could not achieve autonomously, for instance solving spatial problems concerning developments with conflicting land use destinations.
A key aspect of the process was that it left much room for negotiation, not determining the content of agreements too much in advance. During the negotiations the local problems at stake in the area were reframed according to the perceptions of the involved stakeholders. Therefore key actors and key figures at all levels of government, became convinced that they should join forces to achieve their separate agendas, and that the DP-URG was a useful instrument to do so. The combination of the latter within the framework of the RSV of the Flemish government, the political support to invest administrative capacity for several years in this process seem to be crucial success factors for the final approval of the plan for the urban region of Ghent, which contrasts with the demarcation exercises in other Flemish regional cities, generally considered as a policy failure.

The DP-URG could be described as a mix of a practice of ‘soft planning’ in the framework of hard planning, as a formal instrument. The interaction activated by the plan was a clear example of a governance network: bringing a large group of stakeholders together to work around area images and leaving room for open negotiations, within the ‘hard’ framework of the Flemish statutory planning system. The procedure can be considered as ‘hard’ together with result of the bargaining during the planning process leading to the formal approval of the outputs by the Flemish government.

The process setting facilitated central-local negotiations with central government in a directing role, nevertheless under great pressure of political localism which also had an impact on a number of core decisions, for instance on the final design of the ‘Parkbos’ that we describe below. However, central government in this case mainly relates to the Flemish department of spatial planning, while other Flemish departments were much less involved. While the spatial planning department is competent to make up a zoning plan for the focus area, it depends on other (Flemish) departments and budgets for the implementation of all the relevant actions that were part of the final bargained agreement (e.g. investments in road infrastructure, green areas). During the process (also due to protest from suburban municipalities) the delineation process was decoupled from other sectoral policies and an implementation program was never realized, with the exception of the Parkbos Gent (see below). Therefore the DP-URG program did not succeed in mobilising the whole of central government in an integrated way. While the Flemish planning department took up the leading role as a manager of the process, other Flemish central departments with important resources to realise important ambitions of the program, were never fully involved and therefore not committed to the result.

The DP-URG however is an interesting example of an attempt of the Flemish government to elaborate a program on the city-regional scale. Two important aspects of a city – regional program were in fact realised, due to the DP-URG: the determination of urban green areas and the infrastructural development of the canal area in the north of the region. Those ambitions for regional development
and their integration in the final DP-URG concept did not come from the department of spatial planning, but from the city of Ghent and from the adjacent Flemish departments such as the Flemish environmental administration (for the urban forests of green zones). So other Flemish departments did use the instrument of their colleagues of the spatial planning department to integrate some of their plans in the focus area in this planning instrument. They took advantage of policy instruments of other departments to reach their own goals and to consolidate the agreements they reached with the local actors on their priorities.

3.3 Case 2: Parkbos Gent

![Figure 10: Focus area ‘Parkbos Gent’](image)

**Description**

The Parkbos Gent (PBG), started in 1996, is a policy process to develop a multifunctional park area in the southern part of the urban region of Ghent. The focus area of the PBG consists of parts of the territories of three local governments: the city of Ghent, and the municipalities of De Pinte and Sint-Martens-Latem. The Flemish agency for nature and woods took the lead of this network and longstanding bargaining process. So a different Flemish departments than in the case of the DP-URG takes the lead. An important difference is that this agency is not only a green and nature planning department, but also holds important resources to implement the planning choices made to realise the ‘Parkbos Gent’. For some aspects, however, like the road infrastructure or the land use, they are in their turn dependent on other actors.
Different spatial claims (heritage of landscape, agriculture, recreation, housing, nature, ...) are present in the focus area, which is an open landscape pressured by the urbanisation of the greater region of Ghent, the expansion of the University Ghent, building plans of the local governments, and the land use requirements of the farmers active in the region. These different spatial claims need to be matched with the ambition of a number of actors and especially the Flemish agency for nature and woods to achieve a substantial afforestation in the focus area. In that same period the Flemish government wanted to make a priority of the implementation of more green areas in all the Flemish city – regions, in an attempt to preserve open space and to create vast green zones around the cities.

The original concept of such a green zone (stadsbos or ‘city wood’) was extended and moulded into a multifunctional park. The change of the name itself (from ‘city wood’ to park wood’) is an indicator of the result of the interactions and the dominant framing that has been used to come to a final plan. It is no longer considered a wood for the inhabitants of Ghent, but a multifunctional green park which not only consists out of trees but also allows very different functions as well. This evolution was part of the challenge to find a workable compromise and resulted in a multi-actor and multi-level policy process that required a continuous balancing of different interests and agendas. New land use destinations, which changed substantially during the process, were created which had something in it for all stakeholders, most notably a science park and more green (city of Ghent), residential housing destination and solving a flooding risk (Sint-Martens-Latem), allowing recreational destinations and solving a zoning issue for an elderly care facility (De Pinte), and maintaining agricultural destinations (farmers) while also accommodating a group of rich and noble land lords.

The planning process of the Parkbos project was to a large extent one of the outputs of the delineation process of the urban region, as the Parkbos was one of the four green poles to be conserved and developed around Ghent, defined in the delineation plan. After the formal adoption of the spatial implementation plan for this part of the city- region, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Flemish administrations, the Province and the municipalities to realize the Parkbos. To do so, a project structure to coordinate the different actions in the focus area and led by the provincial governor, was set up.

While setting up the project structure, actors are expected to do their share of the work as previously defined. ANB (Flemish agency for woods and greens) for instance negotiates with owners to achieve afforestation in areas with land destination woods. The VLM (Flemish land agency) in turn should acquire land used by agriculture, and find solutions for farmers (e.g. by enabling exchange of land through a land bank). The VLM is expected to make a number of arrangement plans for different parts of the focus area. Finally, each local government should do its part.
The steering committee of the Parkbos is the consultative body where the strategic decisions concerning the development of the Parkbos are taken. The presidency is exercised by the governor of East Flanders, as a commissioner of the Flemish Government. The different partners of the project are represented in this steering group:

- The Flemish Agency for Nature and Forest (ANB) is responsible for the design and management of the forest and nature areas.
- The Flemish Land Agency (VLM) manages the land bank for the Parkbos. It is responsible for sustainable agriculture projects and a number of development plans. Through land consolidation and land mobility a more integrated design of open space in the region is achieved, including the restructuring of agricultural land but also measures for nature and landscape development.
- The city of Ghent is responsible for the development of the science park, and a bicycle bridge project. The Flemish Agency for Roads and Traffic East Flanders and the Flemish Waterway Department Upper Scheldt provide the necessary infrastructural support for this project.
- The Province of East Flanders and the municipalities of De Pinte and Sint-Martens-Latem participate in the concrete preparation, design and management of the Parkbos.

The time frame of this program is impressive, covering 23 years between the acceptance of the plan and the actual implementation which is still ongoing. Important results so far, include: the reconversion of an old railroad into a bicycle connection (including bridges over highway and canal) from the southern municipalities to the city centre of Ghent; the afforestation in the area (including portal zones) has been completed for about 80%; the redesign of agricultural land in the area is part of a larger land consolidation project for the Leie-Schelde valley and has yet to be implemented (scheduled for 2022).

**Analysis**

Seen from a soft space angle, we identify the decision to plan and implement this Parkbos Gent as a ‘hard’ starting point, but the concrete design and implementation itself needed ‘soft’ planning processes, ‘soft’ agreements and ‘soft’ coordination of relevant actors, mainly of and between several departments and several agencies of the Flemish government to enter the implementation phase and to mobilise budgets. The framework of the implementation plan seemed necessary, but not sufficient. During the implementation process, a lot of new ‘planning processes’ (i.e. land consolidation process by the VLM) came into being, fine-tuning original main decisions and additional budgets were made available. Collaborative networks and soft planning techniques are therefore required.

Flemish departments and agencies make use of powerful statutory implementation instruments to realize concrete ambitions in the area, for example through land consolidation by the VLM, enabling a
profound restructuring of the land parcellation. However to achieve this, coordination committees and public investigations need to be undertaken, ‘softly’ applying (through participation and consensus-seeking) statutory frameworks for implementation.

The strong resource dependencies between Flemish governmental units form a strong interdependency chain. The program can only be realised when the resources of the central government (consisting of a range of semi-autonomous departments and agencies) are mobilised. But in order to do so, an active bargaining is necessary, with the powerful local actors (= intergovernmental) but also inside central government itself (= intragovernmental). An important part of the networking is the subnetwork between the different agencies and departments of the Flemish government.

3.4 Case 3: Project Gentse Kanaalzone

![Figure 11: Focus area ‘Project Gentse Kanaalzone’](image)
**Description**

The Project Gentse Kanaalzone (PGK) started in 1993 and is still running today. It started as a strategic planning process in the Flemish part of the area surrounding the canal Ghent – Terneuzen. The PGK started is a partnership between the municipalities of Evergem and Zelzate, the city of Ghent, the Province of East Flanders, the Flemish government, the Ghent Port Company, and a range of other actors. The canal zone is the economic heart of the Ghent city – region with a huge economic return. The biggest firms of the area are situated in the canal zone. So the future development of the canal zone touches crucial questions about the economic future of the whole Ghent region.

The project began as a temporary tuning project for issues on spatial planning and the environmental quality of an industrial zone and evolved into a permanent strategic planning and coordination platform for all issues regarding the canal region. Decades of uncoordinated development and sectoral policies (environmental, residential, economical and traffic-related) of the different sectoral actors operating in the area was a dead end street, threatening both economic development and the liveability of the residential functions present in the focus area.

The Flemish government, the Province of East Flanders, Ghent Port Company, the city of Ghent, the municipality of Evergem and the municipality of Zelzate are the partners within the Ghent Canal Zone Project who are part of the steering group and are also responsible for financing. Important decisions, such as the approval of the strategic plan, are submitted to their decision-making bodies.

The bulk of the actions from the strategic plan are carried out by the Port Authority, the Mobility and Public Works Department of the Flemish government (Agency for Roads and Traffic East Flanders, Maritime Access Department, General Policy and Port and Water Policy), the Flemish Land Agency and the municipalities.

The strategic process was developed as a three-track approach, reflecting the different objectives of the planning activities. The first track was for the elaboration of a strategic plan, consisting of a framework, long-term program and short-term action plan. The second track focused on ‘problem solving’ activities, managing everyday problems through short-term actions, thereby creating trust among stakeholders. Tangible results help to build trust in the process and to make clear that something will happen, and that problems will be tackled. The third track assured engagement of different actors and citizens in the planning and decision-making process. That was the participation and democracy track. This framing of the strategic process on three levels combined consultation, strategy and implementation. It has been inspired mainly by a group of spatial planners who believed that a more innovative planning method should been used for this type of complicated and complex zones. This basic choice for a three level approach, and especially the strategy to combine planning
and implementation and to engage, as early as possible, the network partners responsible for parts of the implementation, explains in part why this soft planning process, outside the formal planning hierarchy, has been and still is quite successful, although the implementation process exceeds all time limits and there are still some planning options waiting for their implementation.

The provincial environmental administration in combination with the provincial governor played a key role in launching the planning process, working strongly together in tandem and supported by an independent planning team. The special position of the governor enables to link different governmental tiers (federal, Flemish and provincial), lobby parts of the central government, making use of party-political networks without bringing a clear personal interest to the table. The governor is strongly supported provincial administration, taking up the project management, engaging with citizen groups and (administrative) lobby efforts.

The governance network bundled people and resources from different levels, but also has a strong commitment from the port community and some large companies who are active in the area. For them, the importance for economic development, the strong action orientation and problem solving capacities of the network strengthened their involvement and build up trust.

Numerous interest groups, including employers’ organizations, companies, residents’ groups, BBL, Natuurpunt, Boerenbond and trade unions, became part of the steering group of the Ghent Canal Zone Project and are involved in the implementation of the various projects. Today, they form the Network Ghent Canal Area joining over 80 actors.

Analysis

A distinctive characteristic of the network is the strong internal mobility of leading individuals, changing positions from the local to the central level and vice versa, transferring and keeping process information inside the network, continuing negotiations of the project through different positions in the network.

The project is also characterised by a long duration, where area imaginaries are linked towards action orientation with a close interaction to budget cycles and decision processes of a large group of actors, mostly Flemish agencies. The provincial governor has a key position in this network, who’s position enables him to link the different governmental tiers. Interestingly, in the past 25 years, three different persons held this position, each contributing to the project, combining their personal skills and networks with that of the institutional position of the office they held.
The process showed the importance of implementation and not just of soft planning; strong governance is also needed in the realization phase, to establish engagement of actors in the statutory planning and budget cycle.

The project can be characterised as bottom-up initiative, mobilising central government actors through project teams and steering committees at different phases of the project. However, informal and personal networks also played an important role, which tampers the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy. The driving seats in the project and the leading managers are all part of one territorial pool of individuals who engaged with one another through different organisations and scales to make the project go forward. In fact, they formed a kind of personal territorial coalition of the willing, strongly committed to improve the focus area as people also living in the Ghent region.

PGK is a clear example of soft planning, mobilising actors into the project based on problem solving, shared frameworks and mutual trust. However, the strategy used to achieve this is by a strong focus on implementation issues and ‘hard’ tangible results including the revision of the regional and the local land use plans and using innovative instruments like territorial budgets for the implementation of so called ‘buffer areas’ and a structural fund for the acquisition of dwellings.

The process of the canal zone was not only innovative in its planning concept combining planning and implementation. It was and still is innovative for the management aspects and for the introduction of new implementation instruments that made it easier to convince Flemish and local actors to participate and to mobilise their resources.
3.5 Case 4: Regionetwerk Gent

![Map of the Regionetwerk Gent area]

**Figure 12: Focus area ‘Regionetwerk Gent’**

**Description**

‘Regionetwerk Gent’ (Regional network Ghent, RNG) is a joint initiative from the city of Ghent, the intermunicipal association Veneco and the Province of East Flanders. Two initiatives that stimulated the creation of the ‘Regionetwerk Gent’ were inputs of the Flemish government: the first one is a call for proposals of strengthening the socio-economic regional policy (Flemish department of economy), another one originated from the Flemish department of spatial planning, stimulating so called ‘strategic city – regional plans’ helping to implement the Flemish spatial policy plan (RSV). Again we see that central incentives explain city-regional dynamics and the creation of local networks.

The intermunicipal organisation took the initiative to bring all partners around the table to harmonize the different calls towards one overall project and one request for financing by the Flemish government, which was finally accepted. So the main budget for the Regionetwerk is provided by the Flemish government.

The starting point for the elaboration of an integrated regional vision is the demographic transition of the region, which is estimated at a population growth of around 100,000 inhabitants by 2050, which creates shared social, ecological, spatial and economic challenges. This transition is said to require
expanding current inter-administrative cooperation, based on a supported target image for the region, in which the relationship between (large) city, outskirts, smaller central cities and rural municipalities is central.

Within the spatial-strategic component of the regional network, in collaboration with the international architecture biennale Rotterdam, it is being investigated in a series of workshops how the expected population growth of the east-Flemish focus area can be used as a leverage for dealing with major social challenges for the region. The workshop explores the challenges in the region with regard to mobility, economy, ecosystem and designs strategies whereby population growth can be used as an instrument for sustainable spatial development. Local initiatives and questions that got collected through a project call will be translated into demonstration projects that will include the following transition issues: renewable energy, shared mobility, healthy agriculture, caring environment, productive city, biodiversity and water.

**Analysis**

The initiative can clearly be identified as a soft space planning activity, where city-regional actors take initiative and combine their resources towards the establishment and harmonization for one city-regional agenda, although stimulated by and financially supported through the central policy initiatives of two Flemish departments, one focusing on regional spatial planning and the other one on strategic projects of regional economic development.

Central government departments thus provide frameworks and financial support for the regional cooperation, although the latter could be characterized as rather weak, mainly consisting out of subsidies for professional project coordination (80%) and (limited) funds for land acquisition (40%) therefore not covering the whole implementation cost of the projects. Also, the political transition, at the Flemish level, from the framework of the ‘spatial structure planning’ (RSV) in the outgoing Flemish government to the framework of the ‘spatial policy planning’ (BRV) by this Flemish government, provides more autonomy for local governments for their own spatial planning and provides less central steering towards city-regional planning initiatives. So the central policy framework at Flemish level changed to a certain extent during the creation and start of the ‘Regionetwerk Gent’.

Given the bottom-up approach and the combination of originally separated regional programs, the leadership role among the actors doesn’t seem clearly defined, which seems to give rise to tensions and struggles regarding the ownership of the process, especially between the intermunicipal association Veneco and the Province of East Flanders. The rivalry between both actors regarding regional matter is not at all new, it has a long history and emerges frequently throughout similar kind of local networks, not hindered or moulded in this case by a strong presence and active involvement
of central government actors. However, neither the province nor the intermunicipal association is capable of implementing the elaborated spatial visions autonomously. They both lack authority and leadership and they lack the resources to implement those strategic plans. They are very much dependent on decisions of the Flemish government.

Despite the quite ambitious goals of the network, important Flemish government actors that seem crucial to implement the program in development seem rather absent in this process. While some of them used the DP – URG to promote their projects, that is not the case in this process. This might raise doubts concerning the likelihood of realisation of the proposed actions. It seems to indicate that planning processes aiming towards new spatial imaginaries without a strong involvement and engagement of central government actors don’t succeed in mobilising crucial capacity towards implementation and get stuck at the stage of rhetorical consensus between the involved partners. The latter leads also towards disengagement of especially local government actors, refusing to engage in ‘speculative exercises’ with no real-life impact for their constituency.

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Discussion & conclusion

In this paper we analysed the functioning and the impact of governance networks on city-regional policies. The four cases combine soft planning with hard planning. How do those governance networks impact the political decisions in the traditional ‘hard’ spheres of governmental organization? And how effective can multi-level governance networks be in relation to city-regional policies? In the previous sections, four cases of governance networks regarding spatial planning issues in the region of Ghent were analyzed, each case representing a functional area for a specific part of that city-region. In this section, the main findings of that analysis are discussed and put in a comparative perspective.

Hard versus soft

First of all, the case analysis demonstrates that hard planning and soft planning are not strictly opposed to each other, but fulfil complementary roles throughout different phases of projects. A strong division between both is therefore untenable in practice. Our case analysis paints a picture where different phases of projects reflect a changing balance between both sides of planning, where both need each other to reach policy achievements and real-life implementation. Hard planning decisions seem to be necessary to solidify compromises and mobilise budgets towards realisation. However, this mobilisation is often accompanied and preceded by dynamics, support and the creation of visions resulting from soft planning initiatives.

Our second observation: successful networking also leads towards compromises, as the cases of DP-URG and PBG illustrate. Regional choices can be made on a city-regional level based on a regional thinking approach, but at the cost of a trade-off and compromise with local agendas. Local governments try to push their interests on the Flemish government agenda, making use of strategic opportunities and by linking dossiers to one another, trying to solve local issues at the Flemish level. More generally, existing institutions try to adapt these ‘new’ arrangements to serve their own interests, but sometimes also adapt themselves to become part of these new arrangements.

Third point: the case of the DP-URG revealed that the hard planning initiative was relatively successful because, although there were some very general goals put forward by the Flemish department for spatial planning, much of the content was still left open for discussion with local actors, and in which actors made use of networking techniques and soft planning concepts. The successful integration of local agendas into the process is considered a key aspect of success and explains why the Ghent case got completed, contrary to similar processes in many other Flemish city-regions. However, without any form of central ‘hard’ planning figure as a guiding framework, collaborative networks seem to work sub optimally and risk to fade out during the process, as the case of Regionetwerk Gent shows. In
contrast, the PGK successfully tackled this threat by involving implementation actors already early in the planning phase, putting a strong emphasis on problem-solving as a way of building trust between actors. A strong coalition of willing, able, and heavily networked officials from the Ghent region are also part of the explanation.

Central government coordination

The degree of involvement of central government actors is a key part of success for collaborative networks in our cases. To achieve this, different strategies are used: either central government itself installs central programs and incentives which are binding towards local government, or the other way around where central government itself is mobilised by local actors.

A strong involvement of the central (Flemish) government in three of the four cases helps to provide the main financial resources and brings in key competences and instruments. However, ‘the’ Flemish government as one unity does not exist, as the latter is in fact a network of departments, agencies, and people with separate interests and agendas which hold different positions through central-local networks. A core network of people committed to develop the focus area and holding key positions across different levels of government seems crucial to make projects move forward. With respect to the latter, the special position of the provincial governor plays a crucial role, standing at the crossroads of local, provincial and central government and balancing the political and administrative dimensions of project agendas. The provincial governor as an institutional office and the personality of those people holding the office prove important central-local connectors, but also between the soft and hard space.

The analysis of collaborative networks at a city-regional scale in Flanders quickly turns into an analysis of the internal organization of the Flemish government itself. To get city-regional things done, a lot of different Flemish departments and agencies need to be involved. Competences and resources are very fragmented in an institutional landscape consisting out of more than 80 Flemish departments and agencies, some of them competent for planning or implementation issues, others performing both roles. From an intragovernmental perspective, a main challenge for the networks is not only to acquire Flemish resources, but also to coordinate different Flemish governmental units. Throughout the cases this coordination is sometimes achieved, sometimes only partially, sometimes it does not succeed. In any case, a strong networking and interrelation between different parts of Flemish government is a key aspect for understanding the impact of soft planning activities in Flanders.
**Implementation**

Hard planning regarding spatial matters can result in the change of land use plans, but therefore do not lead automatically towards realisation of land use destinations or other spatial ambitions. The DP-URG for instance resulted in a land-use plan adopted by the Flemish spatial planning department, but the planning process failed to coordinate other departments for the implementation. So it is better to speak of ‘partial hard planning’ by only one Flemish department. Although the Flemish government adopted this plan and thereby made it ‘hard’, this does not mean that other Flemish ministers and departments engage themselves in the implementation of that plan. Planning and engagements for implementation are therefore inseparable to achieve city-regional solutions and both of them should be given equal attention during analysis, which should not be restricted to mere the planning phase, a common problem in research regarding the subject (Zonneveld & Spaas 2014, Metzger and Schmitt 2012). To fully grasp the interplay of soft versus hard planning, the whole policy cycle needs to be taken into account. There is also a need for a lot of ‘soft’ planning in the implementation phase of spatial programs.

In some of our cases the governance networks do seem to achieve a tangible impact on the spatial development of the Ghent region. Most noticeable are realisations regarding infrastructure, including road reconstruction, buffer zones, nature areas, etc. In these domains, the cases manage to change existing land-use plans towards alternative infrastructural development. However, the hard spatial redistribution issues with regard to the preservation of open space largely remain outside these frames. The latter remains the core business of local authorities and an important part of their financial revenue, little impacted by the current spatial programs. Also other typical city-regional redistributive issues like migration from city towards the suburbs and its impact on mobility and local finances are policy problems that remain largely untouched by collaborative networks.

The behaviour of local governments and the marginal impact of our four governance networks in the field of housing policy partly can be explained by the impact of path dependency. The historical heritage of statutory planning from the past (i.e. the regional zoning plan), proves to be particularly important as it continues to have a big impact on the behaviour of local municipalities. Regarding housing policy, only in some of the cases demonstrated there is little impact. Therefore the spatial planning of local governments still are largely inspired and dictated by these regional zoning plans. Regarding the preservation of open space some small and minor adjustments in our cases are being made to municipal plans, however always at the price of other local concessions. The regional zoning plan still provides local governments and land owners with a set of development chips they are not
likely to give up in the city-regional games that are played. This leads to the conclusion that the impact of our cases on the decisions of local governments related to their housing policies is marginal.

The lack of influence of soft space planning on these institutional aspects might therefore question the effectiveness of projects which aim to impact profoundly the spatial constellation of Flemish city-regions. This raises the question whether soft space planning could not benefit from ‘hard’ institutional reforms, aimed at mitigating the hard limits of local financial and fiscal resources and the subsequent enclosed political culture. But still, even in the case of strong institutional change one will still also have to rely on soft processes and network governance for implementation and to achieve tangible results.
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