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# International Agreements and Region-building in the Mountains of South East Europe

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*The globalization of environmental issues is characterized by representations and initiatives at the global level, but it is also present in the processes of institutionalization of new local and regional scales of action. Over the*

*past decade, and following the promotion of mountains as a global common good, growing attention has been paid to the mountain regions of South East Europe. A large number of international organizations with differing mandates embarked on a variety of initiatives using mountains for their cooperative region-building efforts. The process by which these actors identify scales of action and construct relevant regions has been studied by some scholars, but rarely for South East*

*Europe. The first objective of this article is to follow the emergence of mountains as a growing reference for the regionalization of environmental initiatives and underline the major role played by international organizations. The second objective is to present the mountain initiatives and understand how, in relation to South East Europe, regions for environmental governance are being defined in a broader context (scaling), and for what kinds of issues (framing). Furthermore, this article shows the extent to which these initiatives refer to similar or different scaling and framing processes.*

**Keywords:** Regionalization; mountains; environmental governance; international organizations; scaling; framing; South East Europe (SEE).

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## Introduction

### The regionalization of mountain governance

By the 21st century, there was an obvious increase in regional initiatives in Europe and other parts of the world focusing on the environment and organized around seas, watersheds, and mountains (Balsiger and VanDeveer 2010). The past 2 decades have been marked by increased attention to mountain issues. During the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, mountains were recognized as a priority due to the promotion of the Mountain Agenda and the inclusion of Chapter 13 (Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development) in Agenda 21 (UNCED 1992). Following Rio, several initiatives took up Agenda 21's initial idea of a focus on sustainable mountain development. A broad array of mountain concerns have since then been included under the sustainable development (SD) frame (Messerli 2012), including alleviation of mountain people's underdevelopment and poverty, promotion of sustainable agriculture and rural development, management of water at the heads of major river basins, protection of threatened biodiversity, dealing with vulnerability to climate change, and peace building. Early on, it appeared to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and other

stakeholders that, beyond the promotion of global awareness of mountains, most effective initiatives should be organized at the regional level (Debarbieux and Price 2008).

Indeed, these and other international organizations find a regional approach to mountain issues and initiatives to be more efficient than a global one, more able to take into account the specific issues of each region, and more likely to connect stakeholders, from UN agencies to local organizations, in a practical way (Debarbieux and Price 2008). Regional initiatives such as the Alpine Convention (launched in 1991) and the Carpathian Convention (2003) and organizations such as the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (established in 1984) and the Consortium for Sustainable Development of the Andean Ecoregion (1992) have provided valuable insights into the benefits of focusing on the regional level to define major issues and organize collective action (Church 2010).

Despite its environmental and cultural diversity, the South East Europe (SEE) mountain region has a number of common problems, such as poverty, depopulation, and poor management and unsustainable use of natural resources. This has led to a number of regional mountain initiatives since 1999. This article reviews these initiatives and analyzes their scale and framing as a first step toward

comparative evaluation of their impact on region-building processes. It describes past and ongoing regional mountain initiatives implemented by international actors in SEE. Using a constructivist approach, it analyzes the political institutional actors involved in the initiatives through the prism of the concepts of scale and frame. To this purpose, primary written resources and visual representations produced by the actors were analyzed, along with secondary written resources from the fields of political geography and international relations.

### Scale and frame of mountain regions

The concepts of region, scale, and frame are commonly used across social sciences, especially in studies of transboundary governance. Although some scholars like Brenner (2001) and Neumann (2010) have questioned the usefulness of scale and region due to varying definitions and use, others have argued for the utility of the concepts (Mackinnon 2011; De Vreese 2012; Agnew 2013). Among geographers their use serves the constructivist perspective, where scholars argue that regions, scales, and frames have no objective existence independent from the actors that create them (Debarbieux 2012) and are to be understood in relation to other social processes.

The concept of region has been increasingly used in geography and political science (Balsiger and VanDeveer 2010; Paasi 2010; Agnew 2013). International relations studies traditionally discuss regions as territories made up of nation states. Geographers, on the other hand, have turned their attention to unusual regions that may or may not overlap with conventional borders and ecoregions such as river basins or mountain ranges (Balsiger and VanDeveer 2012), often arguing that these are all social constructs. Paasi (2010: 2296–2297) suggests that this is “nowadays almost axiomatic” but distinguishes between “region as a construct, the end product of a research process” and regions as social practices or discourses that “condition and are conditioned by politics, culture, economics, governance, and power relations.” The second, process-based conception is linked to the relational aspect of regions (Allen and Cochrane 2007), while other scholars continue to take a territorial view of regions (Jones and Macleod 2004).

Scale as a social construction (Marston 2000) has been described as “nested hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing size, such as the local, regional, national and global” (Delaney and Leitner 1997: 93), linked by vertical or horizontal shifts of authority (Andonova and Pop-Stojanov 2010). Human geographers have suggested that scale is “not about the size of things but the spatial and temporal relations among them” (Sayre 2005: 281) and that the politics of scale is where political struggles and social processes are taking place (Brenner 2001).

Being socially and institutionally constructed, regions are shaped according to specific framings. Actors use framing in spatial and temporal contexts to organize

knowledge and experience, mobilize support, guide action, and implement political projects (Snow et al 1986). In doing so they strategically define problems and solutions and provide thematic frames and rationales in accordance with their institutional objectives. Actors frame scales and organize social interactions by shaping a “particular mental map or world view that is persuasive and politically powerful” (McCann 2003: 174). They may conceive different framings; this can be a source of competition, and “the politics of scale may often take the form of contending ‘framings’” (Delaney and Leitner 1997: 95). Conversely, the same actors may formulate a common frame, reaching an agreement on the definition of problems, solutions, and spatial extent. Some authors refer to this as the “frame alignment” process (Snow et al 1986). It is also possible that a single actor simultaneously uses different “scale frames” (see Kurtz 2003).

Scholars such as Kurtz (2003) and Larsen (2008) have investigated relationships and mutual dependence between these concepts. According to Kurtz (2003: 894), “scale frames are the discursive practices that construct meaningful (and actionable) linkages between the scale at which a social problem is experienced and the scale(s) at which it could be politically addressed or resolved.” As shown by Larsen (2008) for the Baltic Sea region, shifting the scale can similarly reframe the problem, yielding new solutions and political structures while discrediting others. Against this theoretical background, this article considers the SEE mountain region as an entity shaped by various sets of stakeholders who compete or converge on spatial issues and strategic framings.

### SEE environments

The Balkan Peninsula is considered one of Europe’s richest areas with regard to natural habitats, biological diversity, unique mountain areas, karst phenomena, lakes, and rivers. Biological and cultural diversity are closely related in this mountain region, which is home to ethnic minorities with unique cultures, languages, and traditions. Limited exchange and the specific challenges of various mountain valleys resulted in differences in land use and everyday life, and low population densities supported evolution of different dialects and languages. The Balkan Peninsula can rightly be considered a mountainous region, given that approximately 60 percent of its territory is characterized by high relief and long mountain chains such as the dominant Dinaric Alps and the Pindus, Balkan, and Rilo-Rhodope mountain ranges (UNEP/DEWA 2010a). The entire region is affected by similar socioeconomic, political, and environmental problems, key among which are underdevelopment and poverty in rural mountain areas paired with the challenges of transition to democracy and a free-market economy.

The promotion of regional initiatives in SEE has been influenced by its geopolitical situation. Following the

radical political changes of 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the political regimes of many states in the region), Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans experienced a period of intense crisis and destabilization. Yugoslavia went through a violent breakup of its federation, which gave way to 6 new countries. During the early 1990s, international cooperation was suspended in many fields, before the region experienced a plethora of initiatives promoting peace and collaboration aimed at healing the wounds of war and fostering integrative environmental management. In the postconflict period, “environment” was seen as an auspicious topic and channel for constructive debate to ensure at least minimum participation by parties that had until recently been involved in violent conflict.

In the late 1990s, numerous international actors led by the European Union promoted the idea of the SEE region, a term more appealing than the Balkans, which suffered from a reinvigorated negative connotation (Todorova 2009). The term “SEE” and the phrase “countries of the region and their neighbors” were used to describe the countries between the southern borders of Austria, Hungary, and Romania on one side and the western border of Turkey on the other (Bechev 2006). This terminology was used in particular beginning with the launching of the Stability Pact in 1999, a multifaceted international institutional effort to strengthen peace, democracy, human rights, the economy, and SEE region-building. The Regional Environmental Reconstruction Program (REReP) was introduced in 2000 as the main environmental component of the Stability Pact, endorsed by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia. The implementation of mountain initiatives in SEE has been heavily influenced by these geopolitical contexts.

## Mountain initiatives in SEE

The term *initiative*, often used by international organizations, is used in this article to refer to programs, projects, assessments, and convention processes, framed to address governance issues in the SEE region. Projects within certain initiatives are deliberated at a more limited, local level and framed as bottom-up support to initiatives. Table 1 presents mountain initiatives and projects in SEE along with their actors, scales, and frames.

### Promotion of Networks and Exchange of Experiences in the Countries of SEE

The West Stara Mountain project was part of the first international attempt to specifically address a mountain region in SEE. This initiative was called Promotion of Networks and Exchange of Experiences in the Countries of SEE, designed in 2000 within REReP. It was implemented by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), with financial and

technical support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). At the SEE regional level, this initiative was framed to foster cooperation and capacity building through management of shared natural resources. Three transboundary project regions encompassing 6 SEE countries were the focus of the initiative.

The key areas to be addressed urgently at the scale of West Stara Mountain were agricultural abandonment, excessive collection of forest products, soil erosion due to weak forestry practices, illegal waste disposal, introduction of exotic species, unsustainable hunting, and development of mass tourism facilities (REC 2007).

### Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Mountain Regions

The Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Mountain Regions (SARD-M) initiative was developed in partnership between FAO and SDC for mountain regions worldwide. SARD-M was launched in 2005, for the entire mountain region of SEE, to combine national assessments of strengths and weaknesses of mountain policies and produce a collective regional picture of issues and solutions. The initiative focused on agriculture and forestry as the dominant forms of land use to “facilitate the formulation, implementation and evaluation of sustainable agriculture and rural development policies ... adapted to mountain specificities” (FAO/SARD 2009).

### The Balkan Mountain Convention Initiative

The Balkan Mountain Convention Initiative (BMCI) was facilitated by UNEP, with a mandate to “promote inter-governmental policy dialogue and regional cooperation” and “translate global policies into regional action” (UNEP 2011), and by the European Academy. With the aim of supporting activities related to the BMCI, they helped establish the Balkan Foundation for Sustainable Development in 2005. Envisioned for the entire SEE region, this initiative remained open to discussions on the delineation of the mountain region, based on the experience of the Carpathian Convention process (Fall and Egerer 2004).

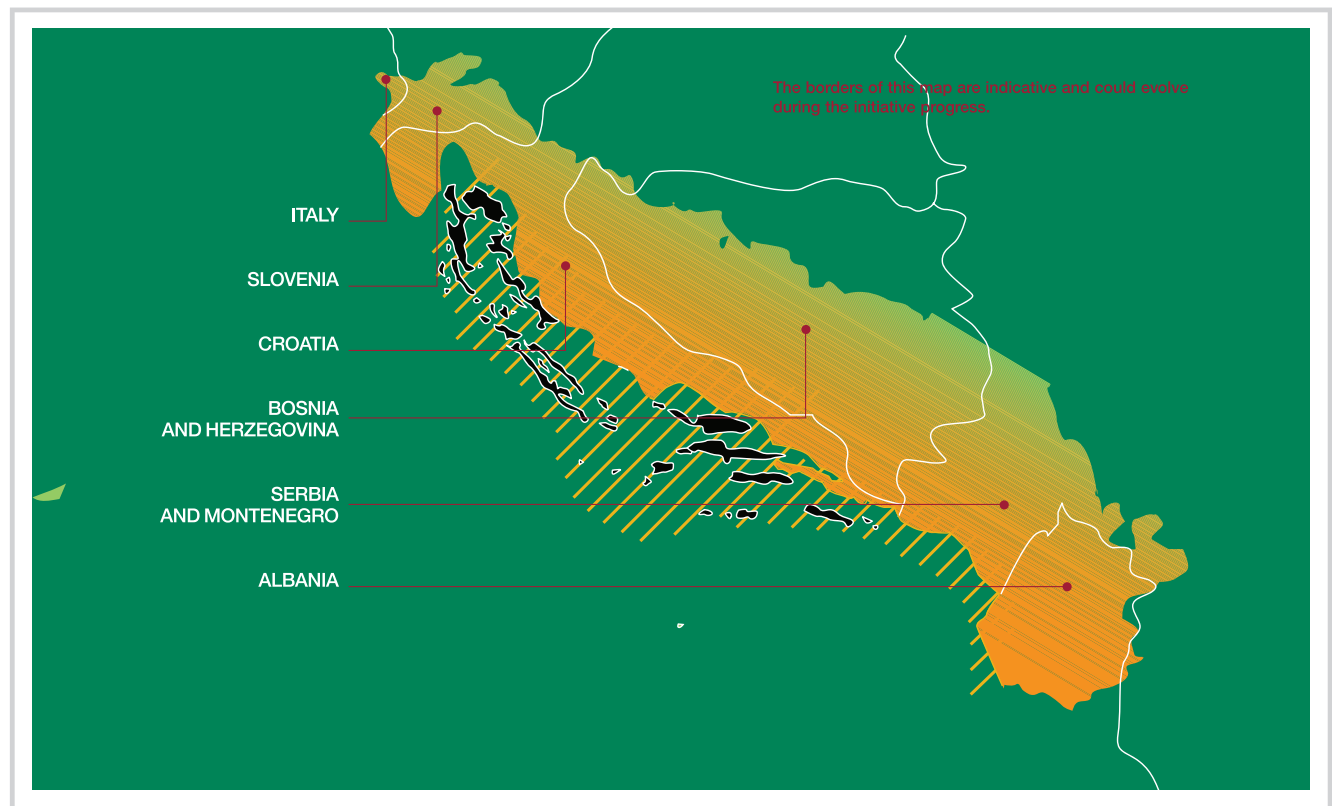
The framing of this initiative referred to conservation that goes hand in hand with SD, integral development of mountain regions, and the need to cooperate on both the international and regional levels. A background paper titled “Cooperation for the Protection and Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions in South-Eastern Europe: Assessment of Baseline, Needs and Opportunities” (Andonovski and Pop-Stojanov 2006) was produced in 2006, and a draft of the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of South Eastern European Mountain Regions (BFSD 2008) was written on the basis of this document, which identified 14 thematic areas of concern.

**TABLE 1** Mountain initiatives in South East Europe.

Initiative	Actors and time frame	Scale	Frame	Countries included
Promotion of Networks and Exchange of Experiences in the Countries of SEE	REC, SDC 2000–2009	Transboundary natural resources: Neretva River Delta, Skadar Lake, West Stara Mountain	SD with a focus on cooperation, democratization, and poverty alleviation in transboundary areas through management of natural resources Environmentally friendly tourism, agriculture, and traditional crafts for local development	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia
Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Mountain Regions (SARD-M)	BFSO, Euromontana, FAO, SAB, SDC, UNEP 2006–2008	Mountain ranges Balkans/SEE	SD of mountain regions with a focus on agriculture and forestry to address rural development	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia
Balkan Mountain Convention Initiative (BMCI)	BFSO, Euromontana, UNEP 2004–2008	Mountain ranges Balkans/SEE	SD of mountains and regional common good Biological and landscape diversity, transboundary aspects of conservation, territorial planning, local development, integrated water management, agriculture, forestry, transport, tourism, energy, cultural heritage	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia
Dinaric Arc Resolution (DAR)	UNEP 2009–ongoing	Dinaric Arc mountain range	SD of mountains and regional common good SD, cooperation, EU approximation, policy standardization, harmonization of existing conventions	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia
Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC)	NATO, OSCE, REC, UNDP, UNECE, UNEP 2005–ongoing	Dinaric Arc/Balkans mountain range Transboundary protected areas	Security and peace building Mountains as natural borders, biodiversity resources, threatened by geopolitical situation, mediums for cooperation Biodiversity, habitat fragmentation, impact of human activities, agricultural abandonment, cultural heritage	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia
Dinaric Arc Initiative (DAI)	COE, Euronatur, FAO, IUCN, UNEP, UNDP, UNESCO, SNV, WWF 2007–2012	Dinaric Arc ecoregion Transboundary protected areas	SD and conservation of nature Biodiversity, ecological corridors, cultural heritage, capacity building, scientific cooperation, policy integration	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia
Dinaric Arc and Balkans Environment Outlook (DABEO)	UNEP 2008–2010	Mountain ranges Balkans/SEE	SD of mountains and regional common good Agriculture, agricultural abandonment, biodiversity, land mineral and soil resources, forest resources, forestry and logging, industry and mining, transport and infrastructure, cultural tourism and ecotourism, waste management, water resources, climate change	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia



**FIGURE 1** The Dinaric Arc ecoregion. (Source: WWF 2010; reproduced with kind permission of WWF)



### The Dinaric Arc Resolution

In late 2010, UNEP in partnership with the Slovenian government initiated a negotiation process for the Dinaric Arc Resolution as a successor to the stalled BMCI. The mountain scale of the initiative was adjusted to include fewer SEE countries than the BMCI. Framing of priorities remained broad and was guided by SD concerns.

### The Environment and Security Initiative

The Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative, established in 2006, brings together UNEP, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and REC, with mandates to protect the environment; it also includes the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which are concerned with security and geopolitical issues.

One ENVSEC project, the Mountain Protected Area Network in the Balkans and the Dinaric Arc, addresses the scale of transboundary protected areas (TBPAs). It identified 8 potential TBPAs, 3 of which were prioritized and “perceived as most urgent from the biodiversity point of view” (UNEP Vienna 2010: 45). This project draws legitimacy from work on mountain biological diversity under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD),

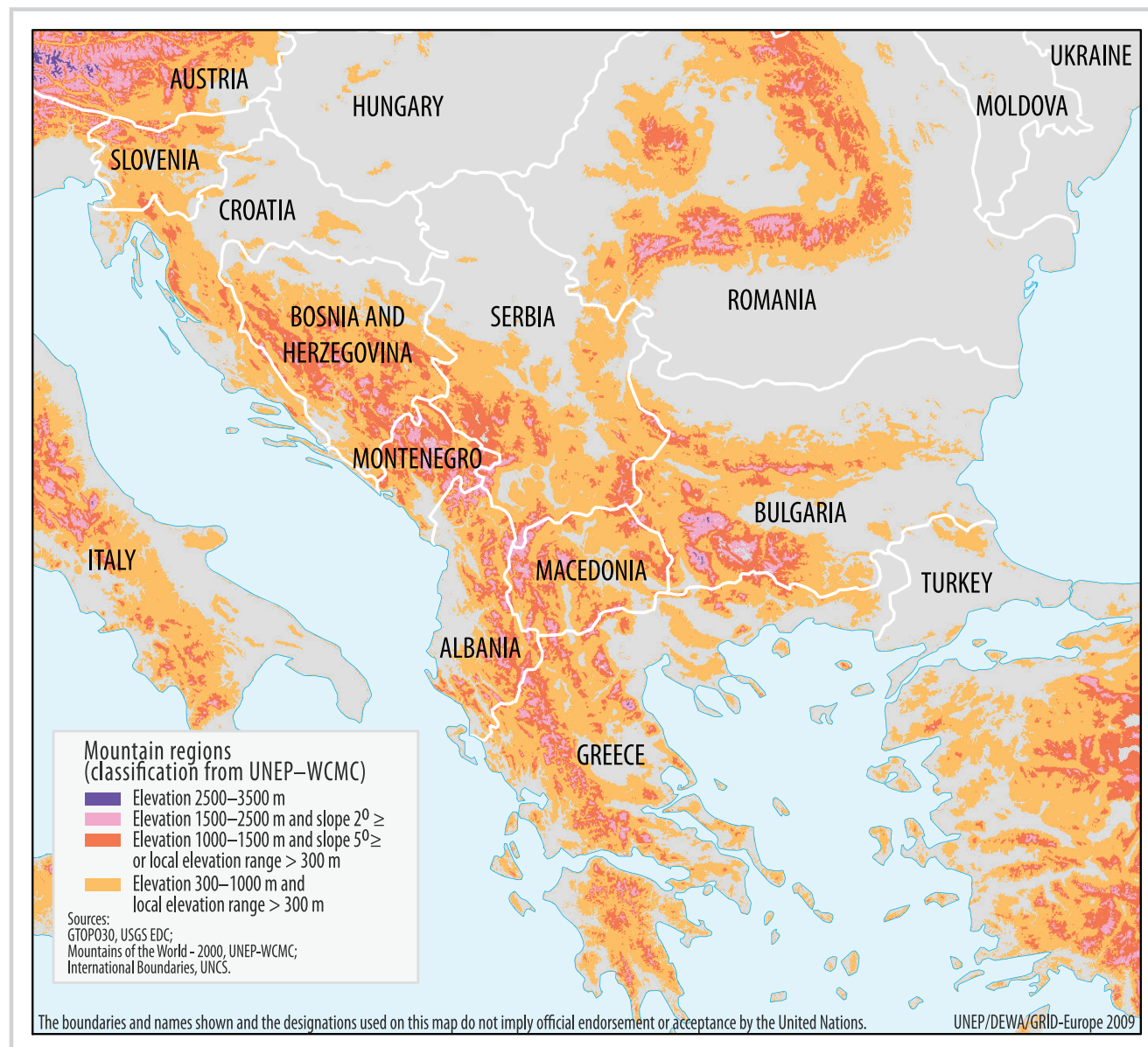
which provides a clear recommendation for “regional and transboundary collaboration,” for “sustainable activities on mountain ranges,” and to “strengthen existing and establish new transboundary protected areas” (UNEP Vienna 2006: 5). The thematic focus is on biodiversity, habitat fragmentation, impact of human activities, agricultural abandonment, and cultural heritage, and its intention is to address transboundary high mountain areas as mediums of cooperation.

### The Dinaric Arc Initiative

Launched in 2007, the Dinaric Arc Initiative (DAI) is a partnership of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), UNESCO, UNEP, United Nations Development Programme, Council of Europe, FAO, Euronatur, and The Netherlands Development Organization. The scope of the DAI is the Dinaric Arc ecoregion (Figure 1). *Ecoregion* is a concept according to which WWF organizes the scale of action and is defined as a “large area of land or water that contains a geographically distinct assemblage of natural communities that share species, ecological dynamics, environmental conditions, and interact ecologically” (WWF 2011).

A project of DAI is Environment for People in the Dinaric Arc, implemented by the IUCN, WWF, and The

**FIGURE 2** The South East Europe mountain region. (Source: UNEP/DEWA/GRID-Geneva 2010a; reproduced with kind permission of UNEP/DEWA/GRID-Geneva)



Netherlands Development Organization. The project's scale of action consists of 6 TBPA's encompassing 5 countries (DAI 2011a). The DAI frame relates to "long-term conservation and SD" of SEE (DAI 2011b); the project deals with ecological corridors, cultural heritage, scientific cooperation, and policy integration.

#### **The Dinaric Arc and Balkans Environment Outlook**

Launched in 2009, the Dinaric Arc and Balkans Environment Outlook (DABEO) is an integrated environmental assessment initiative of UNEP for the entire SEE mountain region. This initiative used the

methodology developed by Kapos et al (2000) for the UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Center to create a map of the geographic extent of the mountains for the DABEO assessment and to define the scale of the SEE mountain region (Figure 2) (UNEP/DEWA 2010a).

Similar assessments carried out in the Caucasus (2002) and the Carpathian mountain region (2007) refer to the global framing of mountain concerns and highlight regional specificities. The DABEO is framed to contribute to "design of common and concrete solutions to the challenges and opportunities on the path to SD" across the region (UNEP/DEWA 2010b: 3).

## Analysis

All the initiatives reviewed here have in common that they are framed in accordance with SD priorities, with particular attention given to the need to reinstate regional cooperation in a postconflict period (see Table 1). However, where one group of initiatives employs broad global thematic framing of mountain concerns, the other group resorts to the narrower biodiversity framing.

As shown in Table 1, the BMCI was launched with the intention to introduce a legal instrument for governance and SD of a new region at the scale of the SEE mountain ranges. This initiative considers the SEE region as comprising states of the Balkan Peninsula, with the exception of Romania and Slovenia. The SARD-M assessment was conceived at the same scale, for the same group of countries, more specifically focused on forests and agriculture. One of the aims was to start producing a common knowledge base and support the region-building efforts of the convention initiative. Even with the narrower framing, the SARD-M assessments were successfully completed in only 3 of 8 intended countries: Albania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia. Similarly, the BMCI efforts did not awaken interest in other countries in taking part in such a regional agreement. One of the reasons for this is probably that in this postwar period, countries were more concerned to reinstate their national identity than to shape a regional one (Djordjevic and Balsiger 2012). As the BMCI came to a standstill, it appeared that the choice of the region to be built was too ambitious.

Nonetheless, the following DABEO initiative fully employed a broad global framing of mountain concerns, envisaged a region of 9 SEE countries (adding Slovenia to the previous group), and went a step further to propose a concrete scale as a map of the geographic extent of the SEE mountains. After 2 years of attempts, this initiative failed to generate sufficient interest and was terminated. Among other reasons, Croatia and Slovenia were not keen on participating in an initiative with the term “Balkans” in its title. The Dinaric Arc Resolution initiative succeeded the BMCI and the DABEO with adjustment of the scale of the mountain area, narrowing its focus to the Dinaric Arc mountain ranges, thus excluding Bulgaria and Greece.

UNEP is the leading international organization in these initiatives, except for SARD-M, where it is an implementing partner of FAO. Both FAO and UNEP were active in promoting sustainable mountain development at the global level. Over time UNEP continued to utilize mountain thematic framing, while showing ambiguity over the choice of region and the pertinent mountain scale.

WWF and IUCN, leading partners of the DAI and the Environment for People in the Dinaric Arc project, use the biodiversity framing prescribed by the CBD at the scale of ecoregions and TBPAs to organize their action.

The Dinaric Arc ecoregion encompasses 6 countries of the SEE region—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. The scale of the TBPAs brings together municipal stakeholders, national administrations, and international actors to implement international agreements on biodiversity. This approach to scaling builds bottom-up support for regional initiatives and inspires top-down support from governments.

The ENVSEC initiative framing revolves around the topics of cooperation, security, and environment. However, the project Mountain Protected Area Network in the Balkans and the Dinaric Arc also uses the biodiversity frame and draws legitimacy from the CBD. At project level, mountains are used as natural borders and mediums of cooperation to which the scale of TBPAs is applied. The 6 SEE countries brought together under this project are different from those in DAI: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Serbia. The lead international organization in ENVSEC is again UNEP, which uses different framing and scaling than in previous initiatives. More recently, IUCN and ENVSEC have been exploring ways to align their scale frames and collaborate at the regional level, including in SEE.

The project Promotion of Networks and Exchange of Experiences in the Countries of SEE, which exists within REReP and has the goals of cooperation and peace-building, can be attributed to both groupings of initiatives. The project encompasses 6 SEE countries, and the scale of action is transboundary areas of 2 countries at a time. The West Stara Mountain project area was at a later stage added to the first 2, Skadar Lake and the Neretva River delta. Considering the time of the initiative and actors involved, this is not surprising. It coincided with the preparations for the International Year of Mountains (2002), and the project implementation partner of REC was SDC, one of the world’s key advocates for the global mountain framework.

Though guided by concern for mountains, the last 3 initiatives show that various actors use a biodiversity frame to bring countries together into different regional groupings over one mountainous area. Here the regional ambiguity persists as well.

Mountains are addressed in a program of work on mountain biological diversity under the CBD. Similarly, biodiversity protection is essential for sustainable mountain development. Although the 2 distinct global frameworks may not necessarily be in opposition to each other, they yield dissimilar choices of scales of action and are the vital elements of different region-building processes (Djordjevic and Balsiger 2012).

The international actors involved construct mountain regions in different ways and for diverse objectives. Due both to their own objectives and to specificities of the mountain ranges, they use different scales to organize



action and implement initiatives. Broad and inclusive global framing of mountain concerns offers the possibility of forming partnerships and navigating between various scales and regions.

## Concluding remarks

The present work chose a clear focus to analyze region-building processes in the mountain areas of SEE. It looked at international political actors and considered the environmental initiatives that these actors implemented in the mountain areas of SEE from 2000 to 2013. It also chose 3 concepts—scale, frame, and region—that are directly relevant to understanding how different international actors conceive a mountain region in different ways. The analysis shows that scale, frame, and region approached from a constructivist viewpoint can be used to help understand region-building processes. Moreover, it illustrates the interplay of concepts and how each one helps explain the other.

Frame is needed to justify the choice of scale, and scale validates the choice of region. The findings reveal the coexistence of 2 distinct scale frames: SD and biodiversity. International actors use them to promote their own visions of geographic entities representing an appropriate scale of action in which to instigate

environmental initiatives and gather networks of actors, in turn contributing to the construction of new regions.

This study focused on mountain ranges and approached them as a constructed scale of operation. The findings show that they transcend various hierarchical scalar systems while relating to different transboundary regions. Thus, scale as a concept provides good insight into the process of region construction. The process of SEE mountain region-building is mainly driven by international actors from outside the region. For many of these actors, the territorial dimension is of great importance, as they struggle to define it by calling on scientific criteria related to ecosystem functioning (Djordjevic and Balsiger 2012).

As the mountain initiatives continue and the number of participating international organizations grows, it is evident that there is a collective determination to utilize the mountain discourse in policy design and region-building efforts in SEE. Future analyses of the role that the global environmental discourse plays in the SEE region-building process should deliberate on the positions of national institutional actors regarding regional environmental initiatives and the concurrent presence of other institutional frames in the region, such as accession to the European Union and the water framework.

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