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## A tale of sky and desert: Translation and imaginaries in transnational windows of institutional opportunity

Maximilian Benner

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# **A tale of sky and desert: Translation and imaginaries in transnational windows of institutional opportunity**

## **Author**

Maximilian Benner; e-mail: [maximilian.benner@univie.ac.at](mailto:maximilian.benner@univie.ac.at);

Department of Geography and Regional Research, University of Vienna, Austria;  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1386-808X>\*

\* *corresponding author*

## **Abstract**

Institutional change in regional economies is affected by macro-level developments such as alignment with the EU and its markets. Countries in Europe's Eastern and Southern neighborhood provide a case for gradual economic integration into the EU's economic space. Processes of alignment and mutual market liberalization shape the macro-level conditions for regional development in neighborhood countries but do so in variegated ways as they are translated into the regional institutional context. Building on literature on institutional entrepreneurship, cultural political economy, and actor-network theory, this article argues that EU alignment opens a transnational window of institutional opportunity for agents to shape regional development through translation. In this often contested translation process, institutional entrepreneurs draw on imaginaries, narratives, and visions and shape them. The paper argues that imaginaries are a useful analytical device to understand the interaction between agency and structure in institutional change. The empirical case of tourism in Israel's Southern Negev illustrates the impact of the country's integration into the EU's external aviation policy at the regional tourism sector as well as the strategies of institutional entrepreneurs to use this transnational window of institutional opportunity to promote diverse patterns of institutional change based on multiple imaginaries.

## **Keywords**

institutional change, institutional entrepreneurship, imaginaries, European neighborhood, EU alignment, Israel, tourism

## **Introduction**

Analyzing institutions has become one of the most hotly debated topics in regional development (e.g. Gertler 2010; Farole, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper 2011; Rodríguez-Pose 2013, 2020; Bathelt and Glückler 2014). Scholars have called for a multiscale perspective (e.g. Zukauskaitė, Tripl, and Plechero 2017; Gong and Hassink 2019; Benner 2021) that includes the interplay of institutional dynamics with higher-scale tendencies such as macro-level liberalizing policies (Peck and Theodore 2007) or, more specifically, integration of countries into the European economic space (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009; Langbein and Wolczuk 2012; Reich 2015). This interplay touches the structure-agency dilemma (Jessop 2001; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011; Sum 2011; Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; Miörner 2020) by calling for explanations of how institutional change is driven by agents under the conditions of higher-scale tendencies and for how these dynamics affect regional development.

To elaborate such explanations, institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio 1988; Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009) or institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009) can help us understand how agents at the regional level seize a transnational window of institutional opportunity<sup>1</sup> defined by macro-level developments in what actor-network theory calls processes of translation (Callon 1984; Latour 1986; Law 1992; Freeman 2009). In these processes, imaginaries, narratives, and visions (e.g. Watkins 2015; Sotarauta 2018; O'Brien 2019; Benner 2020b; Miörner 2020) and their change can play an important role both in defining and selecting the possibilities for institutional change (Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer 2002; Jessop 2004, 2012; Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008; Sum 2011) and in helping institutional entrepreneurs promote new institutional patterns.

The article aims at understanding how institutional entrepreneurs translate transnational windows of institutional opportunity afforded by EU alignment into regional-level processes of institutional change and how they draw on imaginaries, visions, and narratives and shape them during these processes. The construction and change of these imaginaries, narratives, and visions are part of the strategies employed by institutional entrepreneurs (Fligstein 1997, 2001; Garud and Karnøe 2001; Drori and Landau 2011; Steen 2016; Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; Miörner 2020). The case of tourism in Israel's Southern Negev serves as an empirical illustration of how

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<sup>1</sup> The term is reminiscent of Jacobs and Weaver's (2015, 450) "windows of institutional opportunity" but used here in a different context.

the country's integration into the EU's external aviation policy shaped the conditions for the regional tourism sector and how institutional entrepreneurs used this window of institutional opportunity to change the regional tourism landscape towards diverse institutional patterns based on multiple imaginaries.

The article starts by reviewing institutional literature and discussing the role of imaginaries before presenting the context of EU alignment in neighborhood countries and proposing a conceptual framework. The empirical part elucidates how institutional entrepreneurs in tourism in Israel's Southern Negev enacted processes of translation in the context of the EU-Israel aviation agreement. The final section draws conclusions for further research.

### **Institutional change and the role of imaginaries**

Institutional economic geography and sociology address the impact of institutions on economic development (e.g. North 1990; Jessop 2001; Seo and Creed 2002; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Gertler 2010; Farole, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper 2011; Rodríguez-Pose 2013, 2020; Bathelt and Glückler 2014; Scott 2014; Zukauskaitė, Trippel, and Plechero 2017).

While there is a considerable degree of debate in the literature on how best to define institutions (e.g. Jepperson 1991; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Campbell 2006; Hodgson 2006; Farole, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper 2011; Bathelt and Glückler 2014; Scott 2014; Zukauskaitė, Trippel, and Plechero 2017), this paper draws on Bathelt and Glückler's (2014) distinction between institutions, rules, and organizations and follows a working definition of *institutions* as "templates for action" (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009, 7) that can overlap with actual practices but need to be acknowledged as legitimate (Benner 2021; see also North 1990; Oliver, 1992; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Hodgson 2006; Bathelt and Glückler 2014; Scott 2014; Glückler and Bathelt 2017). In this understanding, formal regulations, laws, policies or other explicit *rules* can overlap with institutions but also differ from them (Bathelt and Glückler 2014; Hodgson 2006) while *organizations* are distinct from institutions but closely linked to them (North 1990; Campbell 2006; Bathelt and Glückler 2014; Zukauskaitė, Trippel, and Plechero 2017; Glückler 2020; Benner 2021). Together, institutions, rules, and organizations as well as their interactions make up the *institutional context* of an economy (Bathelt and Glückler 2014; Glückler and Lenz 2016; Glückler and Bathelt 2017; Benner 2019; Glückler 2020).

Despite the importance of conceptual clarity in distinguishing between these three elements of institutional context, their interdependence and mutual interactions (e.g. Glückler and Lenz 2016; Benner 2019) draw attention to changes in all three. Hence, *institutional change* is understood here as a complex bundle of activities and impacts on an economy's institutional context that can happen through various processes (see also Jepperson 1991; Gertler 2010; Bathelt and Glückler 2014). For example, Streeck and Thelen (2005) distinguish between processes of conversion, displacement, drift, exhaustion, and layering (see also Mahoney and Thelen 2010) while Campbell (2006) introduces processes of bricolage and translation between institutional contexts (see also Zukauskaitė, Tripl, and Plechero 2017; Benner 2021). Agency has become acknowledged as critical for institutional change (e.g. Seo and Creed 2002; Battilana and D'Aunno 2009). For example, Gertler (2010) calls for according agency, including entrepreneurial action, a central role in institutional economic geography. When seeking to understand the relationship between institutional structure and agency (e.g. Fligstein 2001; Garud and Karnøe 2001; Jessop 2001; Seo and Creed 2002; Battilana and D'Aunno 2009; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009; Scott 2014; Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; Miörner 2020), the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio 1988; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006; Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009; Hardy and Maguire 2017) serves as a useful lens to analyze processes of institutional change. According to Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum (2009), the defining characteristic of institutional entrepreneurship is that it consists of activities carried out by agents that change their institutional context (see also Garud and Karnøe 2001; Campbell 2006; Bathelt and Glückler 2014; Glückler 2020) which can be an unintended consequence of other behavior such as the pursuit of commercially-minded business strategies (Garud and Karnøe 2001; Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009; Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; Jolly, Grillitsch, and Hansen 2020; Bækkelund 2021; Benner 2021). However, institutional entrepreneurship is usually not an individual agent's activity but a relational process (Garud and Karnøe 2001; Sotarauta and Mustikkamäki 2015) and can also overlap with place leadership (Sotarauta, Beer, and Gibney 2017; Sotarauta 2018; Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020).

The notion of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009) goes further than institutional entrepreneurship, notably in including not only activities aimed at institutional change through institutionalization or deinstitutionalization (Jepperson, 1991; Oliver 1992) but also those aimed at institutional maintenance or reproduction (see also

Streeck and Thelen 2005; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011; Scott 2014; Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; Henderson 2020; Jolly, Grillitsch, and Hansen 2020; Bækkelund 2021; Benner 2021). While the role of institutional maintenance undoubtedly merits further research, this paper takes an interest in how agents use windows of institutional opportunity in a transnational context to push for institutional change. Thus, I focus on institutional entrepreneurs' actions of "mindful deviation" (Garud and Karnøe 2001) that aim at changing the institutional context of a regional economy or that unintentionally do so (Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009; Benner 2021), in either case drawing on imaginaries that underlie processes of institutional change or by actively shaping those imaginaries.

Imaginaries are conceptualized in various fields. Science and technology studies address "sociotechnical imaginaries" relevant for research and innovation (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009). "Economic imaginaries" have been discussed in cultural political economy (Jessop 2004; Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008; Sum 2011) and the literature on "spatial imaginaries" (Lagendijk 2007; Jessop 2012; Watkins, 2015; O'Brien, 2019) focuses on the role of "stories and ways of talking about places and spaces that transcend language" (Watkins 2015, 509) or "selective readings of space" (O'Brien 2019, 1505). Salazar (2012) lays out how imaginaries play an important role in tourism. In the form of "socially transmitted representational assemblages (...) used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices" (Salazar 2012, 864), imaginaries can affect behavior and become solidified in social practice (Sum 2011; Salazar 2012) and thus assume causative power, justifying their analysis in a critical-realist perspective (Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer 2002; Sayer 1992, 2000). Imaginaries are rooted in the (often selective) sensemaking interpretation or narratives of the past and include visions of the future, all of which are relevant for economic processes (Fleming 2001; Borup et al. 2006; Garud, Kumaraswamy, and Karnøe 2010; Drori and Landau 2011; Storper et al. 2015; Steen 2016; Sotarauta 2018; Benner 2020b; Baumgartinger-Seiringer, Miörner and Trippel 2021; Harris 2021). Drawing inspiration from Sotarauta's (2018, 199) enumeration of "visions, brands, images, narratives – all sorts of imaginaries", for the purposes of this paper, imaginaries are understood as a generic term that includes narratives interpreting past events and visions looking up to (possible) future events.

Imaginaries are highly relevant for institutional change (O'Brien 2019), as literature that emphasizes the role of meaning, interpretation, symbols, visions, or narratives, and their translational roles in institutional change and institutional entrepreneurship implies (e.g. Meyer

and Rowan 1977; Fligstein 1997; 2001; Garud and Karnøe 2001; Lawrence and Phillips 2004; Campbell 2006; Zilber 2002, 2006; Drori and Landau 2011). For instance, based on a broad review of old and new institutional approaches and the role of meaning in them, Scott (2014) stresses symbolic aspects of institutions and notably shared views and “symbolic carriers” (97) that can be understood to include imaginaries under what he calls the “cultural-cognitive pillar” (66) of institutions. Similarly, Friedland and Alford (1991, 248) argue that institutional logics contain “material practices and symbolic constructions” with the latter implying imaginaries that underly institutions. Meyer (2006) stresses the role of meaning in institutional entrepreneurship, in line with an emphasis of symbolism and meaning in new institutional sociology (e.g. Campbell 2006; Czarniawska and Sevón 1996). A consequence is that institutionalization can be understood as linking agents, their actions, and symbolic meanings (Zilber 2002).

When it comes to institutional entrepreneurship, narratives and visions help agents rationalize their actions and embed them into societal discourses (Hardy and Maguire 2017). Institutional entrepreneurs can use narratives and visions to bring about change and mobilize further agents (Fligstein 1997, 2001; Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009). They do so “by providing them with common meanings” (Fligstein 1997, 397), that is, by employing imaginaries and shaping these imaginaries where appropriate (Fligstein 1997, 2001; see also Garud and Karnøe 2001; Borup et al. 2006). Similarly, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) highlight the role of narratives in different forms of institutional work.

In economic geography, visions, narratives, and imaginaries are acknowledged as relevant for path development (Steen 2016; Miörner 2020; Baumgartinger-Seiringer, Miörner, and Trippel 2021), cluster emergence (Harris 2021), and place leadership (Beer et al. 2021; Sotarauta 2018; Sotarauta, Beer, and Gibney 2017).

Given that “meanings connect actors to action” (Zilber 2002, 236), an imaginary that defines and conveys meaning can be understood as a mental guide for institutional change or maintenance and a “mental gatekeeper” for economic development (Miörner 2020, 5). In the evolutionary perspective advanced by cultural political economy, imaginaries are important for institutional entrepreneurs to select possibilities for institutional change (Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer 2002; Jessop 2004; Legendijk 2007; Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008; Sum 2011). Hence, imaginaries, visions, and narratives can serve as devices to conceptualize the symbolic and meaning-related



underpinnings of institutions and therefore provide a bridge between institutional structure and agency (Jessop 2001, 2012; Lagendijk 2007; Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008; Sum 2011; Watkins 2015; Steen 2016; Miörner 2020; Baumgartinger-Seiringer, Miörner and Tripl 2021).

Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) elements of agency, institutional entrepreneurship aimed at creating institutions or disrupting existing ones will often be based primarily on present decisions rooted in narratives, i.e. interpretations of the past, in the practical-evaluative element and on future-oriented decisions based on visions about the future agents hope to realize in the projective element of agency (Borup et al. 2006; Battilana and D'Aunno 2009; Garud, Kumaraswamy, and Karnøe 2010; Drori and Landau 2011; Steen 2016; Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; Baumgartinger-Seiringer, Miörner and Tripl 2021). Indeed, Sotarauta and Mustikkamäki explicitly call institutional entrepreneurship “an evolving search for next steps *and visions*” (2015, 355, italics added). These steps may follow either a “persistent trajectory” that carries established narratives over to visions for the future or a “disruptive trajectory” marked by discontinuity between the narrative and vision (Benner 2020b, 166). While the iterational element of agency based on habit (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) may be important in the first type and is most likely to aim at maintaining existing institutions (Battilana and D'Aunno 2009), institutional entrepreneurship will often aim at the second type to create new institutions or disrupt existing ones based on a modified or completely new imaginary.

Following Meyer (2006), institutional entrepreneurship evolves in a window of opportunity linked to perceptions and interpretations which relates to imaginaries and their change (see also Lagendijk 2007; Sum 2011; Steen 2016; Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020). Indeed, institutional entrepreneurship often seems to be opportunity-driven if and when conditions are, or are interpreted to be, favorable to institutional change or to require it (Hardy and Maguire 2017; Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; see also Bækkelund 2021; Garud & Karnøe 2001). EU alignment on the macro level creates such a window of opportunity for regional-level institutional entrepreneurship.

### **EU alignment as a transnational window of institutional opportunity**

In the discourse on European integration, it has become acknowledged that “differentiated integration” (Stubb 1996) is a reality, making the EU resemble a “European onion” with various overlapping layers of political and economic integration (de Neve 2007). This pattern of

differentiated integration does not stop at the external borders of the union's peripheral member states. At the fringes of the EU, there are further layers of integration that cover EU enlargement countries aspiring to eventually join the union and neighborhood countries to the East and South covered by the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) with its association agreements, free-trade provisions, and action plans (de Neve 2007; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009; Langbein and Wolczuk 2012; Reich 2015; Benner 2020a).

On the one hand, the context of differentiated integration leads to the extension of parts of the EU's *acquis communautaire* to neighborhood countries (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009; Langbein and Wolczuk 2012) while on the other hand, it moves these countries closer to the union's economic space (Crescenzi and Petrakos 2016). This economic integration has far-ranging consequences for the economic fabric of neighborhood countries (e.g. Cassarino 1999; Murphy 2006; Cammett 2007). Because of their strong influence on economic development in neighboring countries, EU neighborhood policies can be understood as “(transnational) transformational processes” (Peck and Theodore 2007, 738) specific to this category of countries that lead to variegated effects in different contexts (Peck and Theodore, 2007; Benner 2020a). The implications extend to a host of differentiated regional-level phenomena such as the complex relationship of integration and inequality in neighborhood countries (Petrakos, Tsiapa, and Kallioras 2016).

Hence, we should expect these transnational transformational processes to open a variety of opportunities for agents on the national and regional level to react. In the words of actor-network theory, these transnational processes undergo translation (Callon 1984; Latour 1986; Law 1992; Freeman 2009) through actions and strategies pursued by institutional entrepreneurs to shape their institutional context (Campbell 2006; see also Garud and Karnøe 2001; Jessop 2001).<sup>2</sup> According to Latour (1986, 267), translation means that “the spread in time and space of anything (...) is in the hands of people” which gives rise to opportunities for their agency in shaping the processes and outcomes of the spread of, for example, institutional or organizational patterns, policies, practices, models, or ideas (see also Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996).

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<sup>2</sup> Boyer's (2005, 70) “hybridization” of institutions is a similar notion.

The relevance of the translation perspective is acknowledged in institutional theory (Scott, 2014). For example, Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) stress the relevance of the translation of ideas for institutionalization and Sahlin-Andersson (1996) describes how organizational models develop in “editing” processes that include the construction, translation, and adaptation of meaning through “stories” that resemble imaginaries. Campbell (2006) understands translation as a process underlying institutional change as agents adopt institutions “that diffuse to them from external sources, and blend and fit them into their local institutional contexts” (506). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) highlight the relevance of a translation perspective in analyzing institutional variation through divergent interpretations (see also DiMaggio, 1988), and Garud and Karnøe (2001) discuss translation processes when entrepreneurs deviate from institutions and meanings. Zilber (2006) examines translation of broader cultural discourses into the institutional context of Israel’s high-tech industry. Battilana and D’Aunno (2009) see processes of translation as aimed at creating new institutions under Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) practical-evaluative, present-oriented agency. However, translation includes a future-oriented aspect since new institutions will often be created not only by interpreting the context according to narratives but also in view of visions towards the future. In this sense, imaginaries are part of the process of translation (see also Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008; Salazar 2012), both in practical-evaluative and projective directions of agency.

Since translation processes are contested and contain divergent interpretations (Callon 1984; Garud and Karnøe 2001; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006), different imaginaries and particularly visions and related institutional change supported by institutional entrepreneurs can take varying relationships including complementary, compatible, or competing ones, and lead to varying trajectories of institutional change (Boyer 2005; Drori and Landau 2011; Glückler and Lenz 2016; Zukauskaitė, Trippel, and Plechero 2017; Glückler 2020). Seo and Creed (2002) regard institutional change as a dialectical process charged with political interests and power asymmetries (see also DiMaggio 1988; Fligstein 1997, 2001; Zilber 2002; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Campbell 2006; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Farole, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper 2011; Scott 2014), and imaginaries as interpretations of the past and future underpin the power struggles in institutional change through their political nature (e.g. Jasanoff and Kim 2009; Drori and Landau 2011; Salazar 2012; Sotarauta 2018). Thus, we can expect processes of institutional entrepreneurship to employ different and competing imaginaries (see also Jessop 2004, 2012;

Borup et al. 2006; Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008; Drori and Landau 2011; Baumgartinger-Seiringer, Miörner and Trippel 2021), and some of these imaginaries may become more dominant than others depending on how successful institutional entrepreneurs are in mobilizing others based on the imaginaries they draw on (Fligstein, 1997, 2001; Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009). Indeed, the national-level struggles and uneven outcomes of EU alignment that Langbein and Wolczuk (2012) describe in Ukraine can be understood as the result of such a translation process between the transnational transformational process of integration under the ENP and endogenous institutional dynamics. Below the national level, we should expect similar and possibly even more diverse dynamics of translation as transnational windows of institutional opportunity open.

The EU's external aviation policy (Christides 2016) can serve as an example for a sectoral policy that contributes to the integration of neighborhood countries into the union's economic space and, hence, for a transnational window of institutional opportunity. While the policy as such is not limited to neighborhood countries, the explicit goal of establishing a "common aviation area with neighbouring countries" (European Commission 2012, 16) as well as the spatial proximity makes it particularly relevant for tourism in the Mediterranean. While aviation agreements regulating the access of foreign carriers to airports used to be concluded bilaterally between countries, a 2002 ruling by the European Court of Justice established the union's competence for external aviation which means that the EU can conclude aviation agreements with third countries and thus grant carriers from these countries access to airports in the EU, thus liberalizing mutual air traffic based on a harmonization of aviation legislation (European Commission 2012; Reich 2015; Christides 2016).

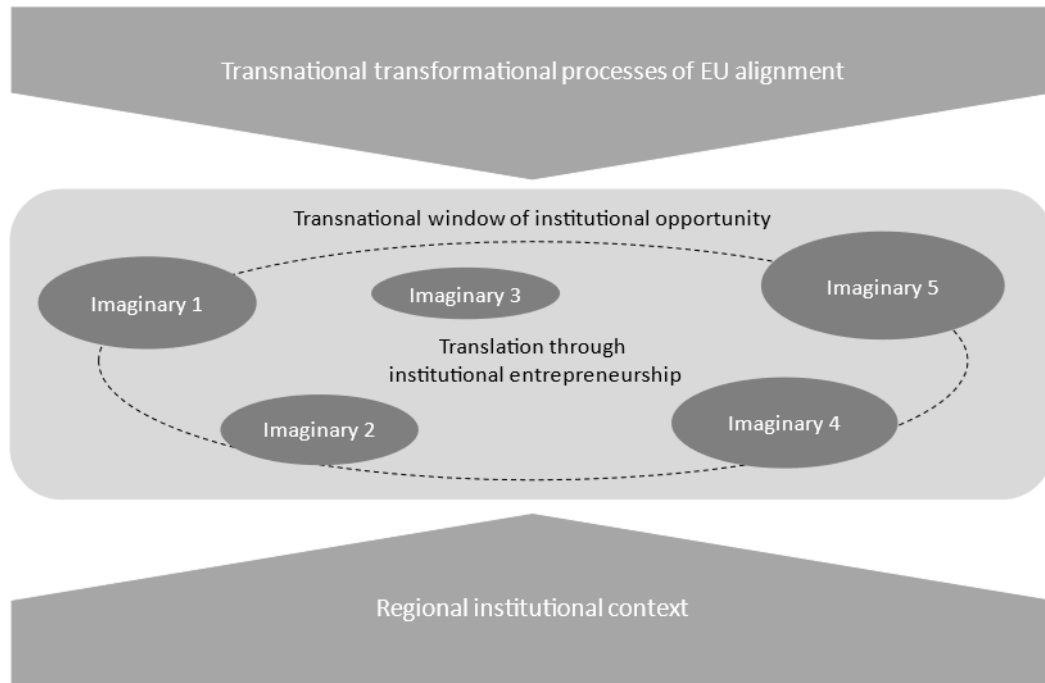
In the case of Morocco, the first country to sign a Euro-Mediterranean aviation agreement in 2006, liberalization facilitated the market entry of low-cost carriers which led to smaller airports being served by direct flights (Christides 2016). This case demonstrates that air-traffic liberalization in the EU's neighborhood has significant regional-level implications by making peripheral regions more accessible for tourists from EU countries. Hence, for the purposes of this paper, the context of differentiated integration of neighborhood countries into the EU's economic space through the union's external aviation policy is understood as a transnational window of institutional opportunity for regional development. This window is characterized by transnational transformational processes of EU alignment which change higher-level rules and get translated

into changes in a regional institutional context through the actions and strategies of institutional entrepreneurs (Campbell 2006), drawing on imaginaries and shaping them (Fligstein 1997, 2001; Steen 2016; Miörner 2020).

### **Conceptual framework**

The framework illustrated in Figure 1 conceptualizes the transnational transformational processes (Peck and Theodore 2007) of EU alignment (e.g. air-traffic liberalization) understood as changes in higher-level rules as the cause for a transnational window of institutional opportunity. Institutional entrepreneurs can seize this window of institutional opportunity to push for institutional change at the regional or local level by drawing on established or changing imaginaries and actively shaping them (see also Watkins, 2015). By advancing institutional change along imaginaries, institutional entrepreneurs engage in a process of translation between the transnational transformational processes of EU alignment and the regional institutional context with its institutions, rules, and organizations (Bathelt and Glückler 2014; Glückler and Bathelt 2017; Benner 2019; Glückler 2020). Hence, institutional change from outside the region is translated into different forms of endogenous institutional change (Campbell 2006; see also Glückler & Lenz, 2016) which can include the emergence of new forms of collective organization, collaboration, networking, rules, reputation, or trust (Benner 2019). Hence, EU alignment affects what Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020, 713) call the “opportunity space for change agency”, and the translation perspective helps understand how agents use these opportunities through different imaginaries (see also Miörner 2020). These imaginaries may compete with each other and, hence, become more or less dominant.

*Figure 1: Conceptual framework*



*Source: author's elaboration.*

Following this conceptual framework, the next section examines how institutional entrepreneurs engaged in translating the rule-changing transnational transformational process of air-traffic liberalization between the EU and Israel by drawing on various imaginaries in the Southern Negev.

### **Tourism in Israel's Southern Negev**

Israel offers an instructive case of differentiated integration into the EU's economic space because of its participation in the ENP and its aviation agreement with the EU that was signed in 2013 (Reich 2015; Benner et al. 2017). The years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic provide a lens to study the impact of the transnational window of institutional opportunity afforded by the aviation agreement (Reich 2015). The Southern Negev with several destinations for desert tourism such as the Arava valley, Mitzpe Ramon, Sde Boker, and Yeruham, and the Red Sea coastal resort town of Eilat allow for examining a diverse range of activities by institutional entrepreneurs to translate the transnational transformational process of air-traffic liberalization between the EU and Israel into institutional change in the institutional context of the regional

tourism sector, drawing on powerful “place imaginaries” (Watkins 2015, 512) about the desert (Zerubavel 2019) and Eilat (Azaryahu 2005).

### *Methods*

A total of 23 semi-structured expert and stakeholder interviews (Helfferich 2019) were conducted in phone or internet calls. Interviewees included representatives of firms, non-profit tourism service providers, and intermediary or destination management organizations as well as tourism experts (see appendix in the online material). In several cases, interviewees recommended further interviewees. The interviews took place between February 2020 and February 2021. All interviewees consented to recording. A total of almost 15 hours were recorded and transcribed. One additional interviewee (firm) answered in writing, and in some cases interviewees were later asked for clarifications by e-mail. Altogether, interview transcripts and written answers resulted in more than 170 pages of empirical material. To prepare for the analysis of the interviews, to explore the subject, and to consider the dynamic dimension of institutional entrepreneurship over several years, a qualitative document analysis of newspaper articles (Taddicken 2019) and addressing tourism in the Arava, Eilat, Mitzpe Ramon, Sde Boker, and Yeruham was performed. The dataset included a total of 212 articles from Israeli general and business newspapers available online publicly and together covering a timeframe from September 2014 to February 2020 which roughly corresponds to the era of tourism development under the aviation agreement between the two major crises of the 2014 Gaza war and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Interview transcripts, written answers, and newspaper articles were coded in data analysis software along a single coding structure (see appendix in the online material) that was drawn up deductively but modified and enriched inductively during coding of the articles and then applied to the interview transcripts (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019; Mayring and Fenzl 2019).

### *Context<sup>4</sup>*

In 2013, the EU and Israel signed a Euro-Mediterranean aviation agreement under the union’s external aviation policy, resulting in a gradual liberalization of air traffic until 2018 (Reich 2015; European Commission 2021). Market liberalization enabled European low-cost carriers to serve

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<sup>3</sup> For the impact of the pandemic on tourism in Eilat and the Dead Sea, see Schmidt and Altshuler (2021).

<sup>4</sup> This sub-section partly draws on Benner et al. (2017).

Israel and led to strong growth in air traffic between 2014 and 2020, accompanied by the national Ministry of Tourism which engaged in international marketing campaigns focusing on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem but also encouraged international tourism to the Negev desert and Eilat by subsidizing airlines for serving the international airport of Ovda. The new Ramon airport was built near Eilat and in 2019 replaced Ovda's civilian operations and Eilat's domestic airport (see also Ergas and Felsenstein 2012).

Eilat is Israel's southernmost city on the Red Sea shore heavily dependent on sun, sand, and sea tourism in large hotels, many of them managed by national chains (see also Schmidt and Altshuler 2021). When international charter flights started serving Eilat in the mid-1970s, the city began its development towards international tourism and its previous imaginary as a place for hippies was somewhat lost to Sinai that came under Israeli control in 1967 (Mansfeld 2001; Azaryahu 2005; Hazbun 2008; Zerubavel 2019). After strong development in the 1980s and 1990s (Mansfeld 2001) and probably related to the second *intifada* (see also Hazbun 2008; Zerubavel 2019), international tourism to Eilat broke down in the early 2000s, making the destination largely reliant on domestic tourism (Ergas and Felsenstein, 2012; Styliadis, Belhassen, and Shani 2015).

North of Eilat lies the Southern part of the Arava valley which includes a number of *kibbutzim* and the archeologically important desert area of the Timna national park (Zerubavel 2019). Further, the Southern Negev includes, *inter alia*, the towns of Mitzpe Ramon, Sde Boker, and Yeruham.

Mitzpe Ramon is one of Israel's "development towns" (Tzfadia, 2005, 475) located at the edge of a large desert crater (Zerubavel 2019). As Schmidt and Uriely (2019) describe, the 1990s saw ecotourism replacing mining in the crater (see also Zerubavel 2019), mostly in a pattern of small-scale, independent domestic tourism but more recently also international tourism. During the 2010s, Mitzpe Ramon witnessed the rise of mass tourism, symbolized by the 2011 opening of a large luxury hotel operated by a national hotel chain but rather isolated from the regional economy (Schmidt and Uriely 2019; Zerubavel 2019). Somewhat similar, Yeruham is located near a crater, has a history as a development town notably for immigrants, and traditionally suffered from a negative reputation but has in recent years seen the development of desert tourism (Azaryahu 2005; Zerubavel 2019; MDPNG and NDA n.d.). Sde Boker is a town well known as the desert home and gravesite of the country's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion,



that is also witnessing tourism development more recently (Zerubavel 2019; MDPNG and NDA n.d.). The growing relevance of desert tourism in these destinations may be related to the recognition of the crater landscape around Mitzpe Ramon, Sde Boker, and Yeruham as a world heritage site by UNESCO in 2010 that marks the transition of the area from an industrial resource towards a touristic one (Zerubavel 2019). Together, the Arava, Mitzpe Ramon, Sde Boker, and Yeruham are defined here as “desert destinations” to highlight their difference to Eilat which is basically a seaside resort.

The market entry of European low-cost carriers to the international airports of Tel Aviv and Ovda or Ramon had two effects. On the one hand, lower airfares made holiday destinations in the EU (e.g. in Cyprus or Greece) more attractive to Israeli tourists, thus potentially posing a competitive threat notably to Eilat, given the high level of accommodation prices in Israel.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, lower airfares, combined with the subsidization of flights to Ovda or Ramon airports, attracted European tourists. However, the widespread impression both from the interviews and from the newspaper articles is that a significant part of these tourists do not spend most of their holiday in Eilat but either travel on to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, or the Dead Sea or cross the border to Egypt or Jordan, which is ascribed either to the higher attractiveness or the lower price level (or both) of these competing destinations compared to Eilat. Another part of incoming international tourists is assumed to stay in lower-budget accommodation options in Eilat such as apartments or youth hostels.

These trends allow for hypothesizing that air-traffic liberalization offers a transnational window of institutional opportunity in three ways. First, Eilat’s dominant model of sun, sand, and sea mass tourism might come under competitive pressure on the domestic market it relies on while attracting foreign tourists so far proves challenging, thus calling for a diversification of tourism models. Second, the development of tourism in the desert destinations could benefit from the improved accessibility afforded by air-traffic liberalization and low-cost flights to Ovda or Ramon airports. Third, the latter effect could have repercussions on domestic tourism also by diversifying and popularizing the desert tourism offers for foreign and domestic tourists alike. All three developments provide mechanisms of translation driven by institutional entrepreneurs that

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<sup>5</sup> This problem has been addressed earlier (Azaryahu 2005; Mansfeld 2001) but has arguably become more acute after air-traffic liberalization.

draw on existing, changing, and diversifying imaginaries about the desert and Eilat or actively shape them.

### *Results<sup>6</sup>*

The results hint at different institutional patterns in Eilat and the desert destinations, but in either case the persistence or change of imaginaries plays a significant role. When it comes to domestic tourism, Eilat's sun, sand, and sea tourism model persists and so far exhibits remarkable resilience despite increased international competition. In contrast to domestic tourism, promoting international tourism to Eilat seems to be based on more diverse models and underlying imaginaries. An imaginary of reconnecting with Eilat's pre-2000 era of domestic *and* international sun, sand, and sea mass tourism (Mansfeld 2001) could be expected to underlie the policy of subsidizing flights, but evidence for such an imaginary was weaker in the interviews than in the articles and this imaginary was by no means dominant. Instead, the view of Eilat as a potentially international sun, sand, and sea mass tourism destination coexists with other imaginaries. As for the sun, sand, and sea mass tourism model, calls for lowering the price level in Eilat's tourism sector emerge repeatedly but so do statements that the high price level in Israel limits the possibilities for doing so (see also Benner et al. 2017).

A different imaginary is that of diversifying Eilat's offer towards special-interest tourists with high purchasing power. Under this imaginary, a large number of festivals are organized (e.g. a chamber music festival), and international sports events are attracted to the city (see also Benner et al. 2017). For example, Eilat was considered as an alternative to Tel Aviv to host the Eurovision song contest in 2019. Another niche driven by a bird research center in Eilat is birdwatching tourism. Further, calls to build a conference center are meant to support and strengthen Eilat's mass-tourism model which relies to a significant degree on incentive and conference tourism.

Other imaginaries reconnect to Eilat's liminal and peripheral image. As Azaryahu (2005) and Belhassen (2012) argue, in Israeli imagination Eilat tends to be seen as a liminal place, an imaginary related to the city's spatial isolation from the country's population centers and captured by the metaphor of Eilat as "the beach at the end of the world" (Azaryahu, 2005). The

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<sup>6</sup> The language of interview quotes in the remainder of this paper has been slightly edited to improve readability.

city's status as a free-trade zone accorded in 1985 adds to its image of remoteness, liminality, and being abroad within the same country (Gradus 2001; Azaryahu 2005; Benner et al. 2017). This imaginary (see also Noy 2007; Styliadis, Belhassen, and Shani 2015; Kaplan 2020) can be recognized in recurrent ideas either to legalize cannabis consumption locally or to legalize gambling and building one or several casinos in Eilat.<sup>7</sup> The significant degree of controversy that these ideas stir, including opposition by religious parties, provides an illustrative example for the contested nature of translation.<sup>8</sup>

Another imaginary that seems to gain ground in Eilat is that of using the city's location at the juncture of the Negev, the Red Sea, and three countries.<sup>9</sup> Under this imaginary, Eilat is seen as a possibly attractive destination for (often younger) independent travelers looking for lower-cost accommodation such as hostels and booking tours to the desert, Sinai, Petra, the Dead Sea, or even Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. In contrast to Eilat's dominant mass tourism model, such a model requires collaboration between a number of agents such as hostels, tour operators, or guides. A national chain of hostels that operates regional tours for international travelers started offering tours from Eilat and recently turned a refurbished property into a hostel which is seen as a major step in realizing this imaginary, given that the business model of this chain includes a significant degree of regional collaboration with *kibbutzim* in the Arava, with other firms in Eilat, and with further agents in the wider region:

“They are working with [a diving provider] to create a [...] diving product in Eilat, in Sinai, lots of diving safaris, they are creating [a] product of traveling in the desert, [...] a product to travel to Petra to Jordan.” (interview #1, 2020)

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<sup>7</sup> Sometimes, the casino idea is linked to that of building a conference center.

<sup>8</sup> The liminality of the discourse is highlighted by offshore casino ships that operated in previous decades and the earlier idea of opening a casino in neighboring Jordan (Gradus 2001; Azaryahu 2005), as well as in more recent ideas to limit access to a possible future casino to foreign citizens only.

<sup>9</sup> This imaginary can be understood as a less ambitious and more pragmatic renaissance of large-scale plans of cross-border tourism projects (Gradus 2001; Mansfeld 2001) under the short-lived “New Middle East” imaginary that were inspired by the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty but were not realized (Hazbun 2008; Benner et al. 2017).

These activities imply institutional change through the establishment of a more open, networked organizational model and routines of collaboration, trust, and reputation. By introducing a “new concept to the city, not the all-included hotel or the really low-budget, low-standards types of accommodation” (interview #17, 2020), this collaborative model is contrasted to the traditional model by spreading the effects of tourism to the region:

“You come to sleep there at nighttime, you come to enjoy the lobby for integrating with other people from around the world, but most of the day, from eight o’clock in the morning until eight o’clock at night, you’re not there. You go outside. So this is a great change, it’s a wind of change for Eilat.” (interview #13, 2020)

In contrast to Eilat, tourism in the desert destinations draws on long-term shifts in tourism imaginaries, consistent with those imaginaries Zerubavel (2019) examines which include the imaginary of an empty, desolate space to be settled and industrialized and competing ones of a heritage space to be protected environmentally and enjoyed touristically. She traces back imaginaries of the desert in Israeli imagination to the Biblical narrative of the Exodus that portrays the desert as the liminal space between slavery and redemption and to the Zionist narrative of the desert as a metaphor for the Jewish diaspora. Further, she finds multiple and diverse imaginaries linked to the romantic, spiritual, non-urban, and peaceful dimension of the desert as well as the adventurous or luxurious dimensions of some forms of desert tourism, though these are not necessarily mutually consistent (Zerubavel 2019).

While various larger imaginaries towards the desert in Israeli society compete, coexist, and are contested (Zerubavel 2019), the interviews clearly suggest that tourism development in the desert destinations has come to draw on imaginaries of the desert as a romantic place for experiencing adventure in a challenging natural environment, relaxation, or spirituality. For instance, one interviewee spoke about a place in the desert that enables visitors to “meet the nature and maybe meet themselves and [...] have a special experience and not something they can do every day” (interview #4, 2020). Another interviewee further elaborated on these imaginaries:

“[Visitors] got to challenge the desert. They take jeeps or they take motorcycles or they take some means of transport and they try to [...] cross over desert areas. Or

some people come here, they're doing all the yoga or all the massages, all the health treatments [...] it's a very personal experience." (interview #21, 2020)

The recalibration of imaginaries is reflected and possibly reinforced in the marketing slogan of the "friendly Negev desert" and the underlying focus on its accessibility from Europe, safety, and convenience and by the emphasis at the region's offers in segments such as hiking, cycling, jeep tours, cultural and archeological heritage, stargazing, winetasting, or local food (MDPNG and NDA n.d.). Indeed, this imaginary of the "friendly desert" was a recurring theme in interviews with stakeholders from locations in the Negev, although there is considerable diversity in precisely what imaginaries and resulting models are pursued under the brand, ranging from small-scale hostels and camps to luxury hotels (see also Schmidt and Uriely 2019; Zerubavel 2019) or the newer phenomenon of "glamping" (glamorous camping). This diversity includes the persistence of long-standing imaginaries, as one interviewee's attempt to connect them shows: "Why is it friendly? Why is it inspiring? Because it's isolated. Because it's desolate" (interview #21, 2020).

Particularly in Mitzpe Ramon, stargazing tourism has grown. The Ramon crater is the site of a space observatory operated by Tel Aviv University, suggesting a certain similarity to international locations for astronomical research and tourism (e.g. Guridi, Pertuze, and Pfothner 2020). The development of this niche provides an example for institutional entrepreneurship in the non-profit sector that started as soon as the 1990s and later became an economic activity:

"With the support of the universities and the astronomy club and other organizations like that [...], they were the ones that organized the first events [...] and they volunteered simply out of interests of promoting scientific knowledge [...]. It was only after these organizations got involved that the private sector realized that there was actually an interest here." (interview #14, 2020)

Stargazing tourism was supported by Mitzpe Ramon being declared a dark-sky nature reserve after an initiative by the national Nature and Parks Authority and by the municipality replacing the street lighting system to limit light pollution. In this sense, the growth of stargazing tourism in

Mitzpe Ramon<sup>10</sup> offers an example for institutional entrepreneurship through collaboration and mobilization driven by a variety of agents such as the Nature and Parks Authority, the municipality, and entrepreneurs offering stargazing tours. These activities drew on an imaginary of the desert as an otherworldly place at maximum distance from urban life:

“From being this esoteric kind of thing, this activity [stargazing] that comes with other activities just as something to pass the time in the evening in an isolated town that doesn’t have nightlife, it’s become a reason to come in its own.”

(interview #14, 2020)

Somewhat similar to Eilat, several festivals are organized in the desert destinations that cater to various forms of special interest tourism such as a stargazing events or a yoga festival. The latter one held in the Arava is an instructive example for a model that builds on the imaginary of distance from urban life, spirituality, and relaxation and that combines with offers of alternative, ecological, and art-related *kibbutz* tourism (see also Zerubavel 2019).

Both in Mitzpe Ramon and the Arava, environmental criticism against plans for new hotels drawing on images such as luxury, nature and sports, or relaxation and quiet highlights the contested nature of the translation process. At the same time, this issue demonstrates how the diverse imaginaries featuring in the process can compete and contradict each other, confirming the tensions between different imaginaries in desert tourism Zerubavel (2019) finds. In particular, the tension between luxury tourism and community-based tourism in Mitzpe Ramon (Schmidt and Uriely 2019) provides an example for friction between different models. However, the relationship between different interests is complex, as views that tourism helps create public awareness for environmental concerns (see also Schmidt and Uriely 2019; Zerubavel 2019) demonstrate:

“Nature conservation is done with the public [...] and tourism is part of it. Community, education, and tourism is all part of how to protect nature because if [...] an area is important to people so it is more likely to be protected.” (interview #7, 2020)

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<sup>10</sup> Stargazing is also promoted in Yeruham (MDPNG and NDA n.d.).

Notwithstanding these tensions, agents used the diversification of imaginaries to promote the growth of desert tourism niches (e.g. stargazing or wine tourism) through regional-level institutional change. Municipalities decided to market themselves together under the “friendly desert” brand by setting up a regional tourism association since 2014 which seems to have contributed to the national tourism ministry’s efforts to market desert tourism internationally. This association arguably played a significant role in increasing collaboration not only between the municipalities but also between tourism entrepreneurs in Mitzpe Ramon, Sde Boker, and Yeruham. While some cooperation between tourism firms existed before the association was created, it extended their knowledge of cooperation partners:

“[accommodation providers] don’t have enough time to really explore the area and get to know every wine farm, every stargazing company, every jeep safari operator, or every good tour guide who is making hiking tours or biking tours.”  
(interview #13, 2020)

The association’s activities were designed to fill this gap by offering courses and trainings on topics such as stargazing or winegrowing. This strengthened cooperation dynamic at the regional level seems to have been reinforced by entrepreneurs’ perception of opportunities such as air-traffic liberalization and the opening of Ramon airport:

“The fact that the situation changed and the tourist workers around here understood that we have a very big opportunity at our hands and we mustn’t miss it led to a situation of more and more conversations, okay, how can we actually change our situation, our reality.” (interview #16, 2020)

Hence, changes on the levels of institutions (informal cooperation among agents) and organizations (formalization of cooperation in an association) interacted. Still, these processes are not without contestation, as the example of one interviewee who expressed the impression that activities in Mitzpe Ramon receive disproportionately large attention compared to the other desert destinations illustrates. In any case, the institutional change of intensified collaboration and organization relies on longer-term changes in imaginaries that institutional entrepreneurs such as the “friendly desert” association, municipalities, and firms draw on but also actively reinforce by marketing the region as the “friendly desert”.

Similarly but on the local scale, Yeruham offers an example for local institutional entrepreneurs' motivation to change the town's image marked by factory closures and unemployment:

“It's a sense that tourism can really change the way people perceive Yeruham like the locals perceive Yeruham and kind of be proud of the place they live in as opposed to years ago where it was like a place where [...] you don't want to be associated with.” (interview #19, 2020)

This wish to change the imaginary about Yeruham arguably served as a major motivation for collaboration between tourism entrepreneurs, including ones that moved there from the center of the country, who founded a local tourism association.

### *Discussion*

The results confirm the role of imaginaries in institutional entrepreneurship in translation processes suggested in the conceptual framework (Figure 1). The desire of tourism entrepreneurs in Yeruham to promote a more positive imaginary about a location suffering from the negative reputation of a peripheral development town and the resulting collaboration in the form of a local association provides a particularly illustrative example for the role of imaginaries in institutional entrepreneurship. This example, as well as the regional-level collaboration in the “friendly desert” association, signifies changes in the organizational element of the region's institutional context. These organizational changes relate to the extension of collaboration opportunities and most likely trust, with these new associations possibly acting as “relational brokers” (Benner 2019, 1807). The “friendly desert” brand to market forms of tourism drawing on imaginaries of adventure and relaxation at the regional level can be understood as a change that touches institutions in changing the way the desert tourism sector markets itself as well as rules in the form of regional and local marketing policies.

When it comes to the role of imaginaries, institutional entrepreneurs both in Eilat and the desert destinations seem to draw more on existing or evolving imaginaries than actively “inventing” them. At the same time, they do reinforce these imaginaries by actively supporting them through their organizational models and marketing strategies.

In the desert destinations, the changes in imaginaries about the desert and the emergence of different niches of desert tourism are a long-term process that started before the aviation



agreement and in part focused on domestic tourism. Still, the window of institutional opportunity afforded by air-traffic liberalization seems to have supported these long-term changes by extending them more towards international tourism. For example, one interviewee from a desert destination stated that since the advent of low-cost carriers, “suddenly we can see tourists from all over Europe coming to our area. That wasn’t before that” (interview #8, 2020). In particular, the dynamics of the “friendly desert” association in increasing collaboration among tourism operators which qualifies as a change of institutions can be seen in light of this transnational window of institutional opportunity.

In Eilat, in contrast, the window of institutional opportunity seems to have had a more direct effect in encouraging some institutional entrepreneurs to push for a change in imaginaries. The introduction of a collaborative regional model by a national hostel and tour provider signifies a change in institutions which presupposes mutual trust and a willingness to collaborate among agents not just in Eilat but across the wider region.

The limited success of the subsidization of low-cost flights arguably played a major role in highlighting the need to develop a new vision for Eilat. Several visions are currently discussed, in part controversially, and the underlying imaginaries are partly competing. Among these visions is continuing the currently dominant model of sun, sand, and sea tourism for the domestic market but ideas on ways to reinforce it draw on different imaginaries.

The multitude of partly inconsistent imaginaries that have developed in the desert destinations shows that several imaginaries can coexist, and the window of institutional opportunity of air-traffic liberalization with its implications both on international and domestic tourism affords an arena for contested experimentation with new imaginaries by institutional entrepreneurs. Thus, at different stages, the cases of both the desert destinations and Eilat show how a transnational window of institutional opportunity is translated into regional processes of institutional change that involve struggles about varying imaginaries, some of them consistent and others competing. For example, the different institutional patterns symbolized by luxury tourism and community-based tourism in Mitzpe Ramon that Schmidt and Uriely (2019) analyze seem to compete, with the former arguably gaining the upper hand. Still, the diversity of special-interest tourism such as stargazing, birdwatching, wine tourism, or yoga suggests different models can coexist within the region.

While the development of tourism in Eilat and in the desert destinations in recent years seems largely unrelated, it is remarkable that some of the imaginaries relevant for either case are complementary. Consistent with the evolution and diversification of desert imaginaries (Zerubavel 2019), some institutional entrepreneurs such as the hostel and tour operator entering the market in Eilat and offering regional tours mainly for international tourists seem to promote a new imaginary about both Eilat and the desert destinations. This imaginary employs the idea of a bridge between continents, countries, and cultures consistent with historical connections such as the incense route that includes Nabatean archeological sites in the Southern Negev classified as UNESCO world heritage (Zerubavel 2019; MDPNG and NDA n.d.), thus taking advantage of the possibility of crossing the borders to Egypt and Jordan, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the instances of institutional entrepreneurship evident in Eilat and desert destinations, other forms of agency might prove just as important during the transnational window of institutional opportunity of air-traffic liberalization. In Eilat, for example, the models of sun, sand, and sea mass tourism focused on domestic tourists could remain dominant due to maintenance or reproductive agency by established agents (Streeck and Thelen 2005; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009; Henderson 2020; Jolly, Grillitsch, and Hansen 2020; Bækkelund 2021) without signification changes. Alternatively, Eilat could see the emergence of a diversity of models that combine sun, sand, and sea tourism with special-interest niches such as sports tourism, cultural events, or tours to the desert, based on a more diverse institutional context.

## **Conclusions**

This article proposed a conceptualization of the windows of institutional opportunity that transnational transformational processes open. The example of regional tourism development in Israel in the wake of air-traffic liberalization with the EU offers an instructive example but the interplay between EU alignment and regional-level institutional change is a broader topic that calls for more research. The translation perspective offered here can be useful for examining wider processes of EU alignment such as free trade under the ENP (Cassarino 1999; Murphy

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<sup>11</sup> The imaginary and related model is not new. Gradus (2001, 91) mentions regional tours along the “Spice Route” during the 1990s (see also Mansfeld 2001; Hazbun 2008; Zerubavel 2019). Hence, the imaginary seems to witness a revival.

2006; Cammett 2007; Benner 2020a). Various transnational transformational processes overlap and different transnational windows of institutional opportunity open and close, resulting in a complex web of spaces for action for institutional entrepreneurs. Considering these complex dynamics of multiple and overlapping windows of institutional opportunity merits further research that can help us better understand the context and conditions for institutional entrepreneurship. Drawing on notions of industrial-institutional multiscale coevolution (Gong and Hassink 2019; Benner 2021) and nestedness (Swyngedouw 2004) can offer useful perspectives.

While the present paper focused on institutional entrepreneurship within a transnational window of institutional opportunity, it is important to remember that other forms of agency can be just as relevant in such a translation process. The Eilat case suggests that translation can entail competition between imaginaries driven not only by institutional entrepreneurship but also by maintenance agency. While in this case it is too early to assess the eventual outcomes of translation, further research on cases where maintenance agency prevailed during a transnational window of institutional opportunity will be important to help us better understand these processes and their conditions and outcomes.

The role imaginaries play in translating between transnational transformational processes and the regional institutional context calls for considering the symbolic and meaning-related dimension underlying the strategies and activities of institutional entrepreneurs, in line with traditions such as institutional sociology and cultural political economy. Imaginaries offer useful analytical devices for conceptualizing how this symbolic and meaning-related dimension of institutional change affects processes of regional development, notably in a translation perspective. Just as the translation metaphor in its literal sense needs a language with a vocabulary to choose from (Freeman 2009), the translation of transnational transformational processes into regional institutional change needs imaginaries that pre-structure the strategies for institutional entrepreneurs to pursue. Somewhat similar to studies from the fields of actor-network theory (e.g. Callon 1984) and science and technology studies (e.g. Jasanoff and Kim 2009), such a perspective can help us better understand how structure and agency interact in regional development. More research on how imaginaries shape regional development under processes of transnational change and on how these imaginaries are in turn shaped merits further attention by economic geographers.

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## Appendix

Table A1 provides an overview of the stakeholder and expert interviews conducted.

*Table A1: Overview of interviews*

General interviewee category	Specific interviewee category	Number of interviewees
Stakeholders	Firms	7
	Non-profit tourism service providers	3
	Intermediary or destination management organizations	5
Experts	Tourism experts	12
<b>Total<sup>12</sup></b>		<b>23</b>

*Source: author's elaboration.*

Table A2 provides the final coding structure used for the analysis of interview transcripts and newspaper articles, as well as the number of segments coded for each code in the interviews and articles.

*Table A2: Final coding structure*

Code	Number of codes segments (articles)	Number of codes segments (interviews)
1. Status quo		
1.1 Arava	0	14
1.2 Eilat	47	56
1.3 Mitzpe Ramon	6	17
1.4 Sde Boker	1	12
1.5 Yeruham	3	7
2. EU alignment		
2.1 macro policies		
2.1.1 aviation agreement	40	15
2.1.2 subsidization of flights	137	28
2.1.3 international tourism marketing (referring to the Southern Negev)	36	39
2.2 dynamics		
2.2.1 inbound tourism	223	68
2.2.2 outbound tourism	105	28
2.2.3 domestic tourism	58	27
2.2.4 price competition	136	77
3. Institutional entrepreneurship (focus on 2014 to 2020)		
3.1 location of institutional entrepreneurship		
3.1.1 Arava	39	59

<sup>12</sup> The number of interviewees categorized in the table exceeds the total number of interviewees because of overlapping cases where interviewees are classified in more than one category.

	3.1.2 Eilat	182	135
	3.1.3 Mitzpe Ramon	18	89
	3.1.4 Sde Boker	5	46
	3.1.5 Yeruham	26	39
3.2 institutional entrepreneurs (regional level)			
	3.2.1 commercial agents	46	105
	3.2.2 non-commercial agents (including kibbutzim, non-governmental organizations,)	15	56
	3.2.3 political or collective agents (including associations, destination management organizations)	50	60
3.3 institutional patterns			
	3.3.1 expansion of sun, sand, sea tourism	21	16
	3.3.1.1 all-inclusive offers	3	5
	3.3.2 luxury tourism (including glamping)	21	33
	3.3.3 liminal tourism (e.g. casino, cannabis)	81	16
	3.3.4 meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions (e.g. conference center, trade union tours)	19	9
	3.3.5 special-interest niches (e.g. archeology, birdwatching, ecotourism, modern art, religion, stargazing, wine tourism, yoga)	51	76
	3.3.6 events (e.g. festivals, sports tournaments)	39	27
	3.3.7 regional tours (including to Egypt and Jordan as well as to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem)	7	35
	3.3.8 collaboration within the regional/local tourism sector (including linkages to the community)	13	63
3.4 target groups			
	3.4.1 domestic tourists	18	22
	3.4.2 international tourists	39	45
	3.4.3 package tour guests	5	12
	3.4.4 individual tourists	13	25
3.5 imaginaries drawn on (including visions and narratives)			
	3.5.1 desert nature adventure	21	40
	3.5.2 desolation or emptiness	12	31
	3.5.3 distance from urban life, relaxation, romance (including notions of healing and spirituality)	37	40
	3.5.4 “friendly desert” (secure and accessible desert, including for Europeans)	1	20
	3.5.5 historical and/or religious heritage	21	23
	3.5.6 juncture region (integrating Eilat, the sea, the desert, and/or Egypt and Jordan)	20	48
	3.5.7 liminality or peripherality	67	29
	3.5.8 (re)establishing international mass tourism in Eilat (including reconnecting with Eilat's 1990s era)	31	2
	3.6 contested nature of translation	146	35
Total		1,859	1,629

Source: author's elaboration.

**Department of Geography and Regional Research  
University of Vienna**

Contact person: Michaela Trippl  
Universitätsstraße 7/5/A0528, 1010 Vienna, Austria  
Tel.: +43-1-4277-48720  
E-Mail: Michaela.trippel@univie.ac.at  
<https://humangeo.univie.ac.at/>

**Department of Socioeconomics  
Vienna University of Economics and Business**

Contact person: Jürgen Essletzbichler  
Welthandelsplatz 1, 1020 Vienna, Austria  
Tel.: +43-1-31336/4206  
E-Mail: juergen.essletzbichler@wu.ac.at  
<http://www.wu.ac.at/en/department-socioeconomics>

**Institute for Urban and Regional Research  
Austrian Academy of Sciences**

Contact person: Robert Musil  
Postgasse 7/4/2, 1010 Vienna, Austria  
Tel.: +43-1-51581-3520  
E-Mail: robert.musil@oeaw.ac.at  
<https://www.oeaw.ac.at/en/isr/home/>

**Department of Working Life and Innovation  
University of Agder**

Contact person: Arne Isaksen  
Jon Lilletunsvei 3/A161, Grimstad, Norway  
Tel.: +47-37-23-33-53  
E-Mail: arne.isaksen@uia.no  
<https://www.uia.no/en/about-uia/faculties/school-of-business-and-law/department-of-working-life-and-innovation>

**Department of Geography  
Kiel University**

Contact person: Robert Hassink  
Hermann-Rodewald-Str. 9, 24098 Kiel, Germany  
Tel.: +49-431-880-2951  
E-Mail: hassink@geographie.uni-kiel.de  
<https://www.wigeo.uni-kiel.de/en/>