
Cross-border cooperation in a tumultuous Europe¹

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a study of the history of European cross-border cooperation, its most important features and several issues currently being debated. As such, it offers a brief overview of the origins of cross-border cooperation, which trace back to the reconstruction of Europe after the two World Wars. It then focuses on the measures adopted by the European Commission since 2017 in an effort to promote cooperation, following the ‘Cross-Border Review’. Thirdly, it analyses how cross-border cooperation was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which fostered policies aimed at bolstering state boundaries, leading to an increasing number of scholarly studies not only focused on cross-border cooperation but also falling within a broader debate in the field of border studies. Finally, we outline the strengths and weaknesses detected today, while also comparing European cross-border cooperation with the same phenomenon in other parts of the world.

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1. Introduction

Just when it seemed that the effects of the economic crisis that started in 2008 were a thing of the past, the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed a truly global emergency that had political, social and economic ramifications. After the worst two years were over, Russia's invasion of Ukraine once again shined the spotlight on the important role geopolitics plays in markets, and how war has direct economic effects on ordinary people. Meanwhile, Europe has been experiencing a migration crisis since 2015, alongside an unfinished Brexit. All these processes have had a direct impact on state borders, which have tended to be battened down in the face of these crises, and have cast doubt on a European integration process that is sustained on cohesion, a territorial factor in which cross-border cooperation is essential.

Without striving to provide an exhausting overview of the issue of European cross-border cooperation today, in this paper we will investigate past milestones, point out the most salient features and mention certain matters currently being debated. Thus, we shall first provide a brief overview of the origins of cross-border cooperation on the continent, which came hand-in-hand with European reconstruction after the two World Wars. We will then focus on the measures designed to encourage cooperation that have been promoted by the European Commission since 2017, following the 'Cross-Border Review', to see how they have fared in these tumultuous times. Thirdly, we will analyse how cross-border cooperation was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which fostered policies aimed at bolstering state boundaries. This has led to an increasing number of scholarly studies not only focused on cross-border cooperation but also falling within a broader debate in the field of border studies. Finally, we will outline the strengths and weaknesses that can be seen today, while also comparing European cross-border cooperation with the same phenomenon in other parts of the world, such as Latin America.

2. Cross-border cooperation in Europe: since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine

In the wake of the two World Wars, the border towns along the Rhine River launched a process that was at first merely informal in nature but gradually grew more sophisticated, until it eventually became an essential part of the current European integration process, particularly due to it being a bottom-up phenomenon. This is where the seed of cross-border cooperation in Europe was sown; it started with good-neighbour policies and has given rise to an entire plethora of structures, agreements and initiatives since the creation of the first Euroregion in 1958 (in Gronau, Westphalia). Durà *et al.* (2018) have counted 343 territorial cooperation structures in Europe, 299 of which are identified as being devoted to cross-border cooperation with some Euroregional features, while 267 actually meet the operating definition of 'Euroregion'. Kaucic

and Sohn (2022) limit this list to 209 cross-border cooperation initiatives which have some type of institutionalisation in the territory that serves as their sphere of action. In any case, other lists checked on different border region platforms corroborate the existence of several hundred structures that mark the European Union's internal and external borders.² Thus, we can assert that cross-border cooperation has a longstanding tradition in many places in Europe. However, in some southern European countries like Spain, Portugal and Greece, this has only been possible after the 1980s in the wake of major political changes, the instatement of democratic systems and these countries' accession to the European Community (Paül *et al.*, 2017). A similar process has taken place in Central and Eastern European countries since 1989, when they joined the European Union (EU), and it continues today with the countries that are in the 'pre-accession' phase (the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia).

It is essential to emphasise that at the beginning, cross-border cooperation tended to be more bottom-up than top-down. Representatives of the cross-border regions wanted to improve living conditions, guarantee lasting peace and eradicate barriers, restrictions and any other factors that could contribute to separating the peoples that live in border regions (Trillo, 2010; Peyrony, 2020). This is why associations of border towns and regions on both sides were set up according to the different national laws and focused on matters of mutual interest. Sometimes a single structure with members from two states (e.g., different Euroregions along the German-Dutch border) or from three states (e.g., the Mosel/Rhine Euroregion [BE/DE/NL]) was established through bilateral or trilateral agreements (like the 1991 Anholt DE-NL Treaty), while others had to be established with coordination from associations from each of the participating states within the same Euroregion. Structures that were larger in terms of territories and populations were also created, like the Greater Region of SaarLorLux (BE/DE/FR/LU), the Lake Constance Conference (AT/CH/DE/LI) and the Upper Rhine Conference (CH/DE/FR). A growing number of working communities was created (among the Alpine, Danube and Pyrenean countries), as well as Eurodistricts, albeit to a lesser extent (AEBR, 1995).

In any case, in the late 1960s there were few European or bilateral instruments that favoured cross-border cooperation. Plus, it was essential to coordinate efforts and create an effective lobby before the European institutions and state authorities in order to defend the interests of the border regions (and the nascent cross-border regions). A mouthpiece was needed in Europe, and it materialised with the founding of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) in Anholt Castle (Westphalia) on the initiative of the regions and the Council of Europe as a Permanent Conference of European Border Regions. The AEBR not only had solid ties with the Council of Europe but also forged bonds with the European Parliament,

2. The most prominent ones are the Association of European Border Regions (<<https://www.aebr.eu/>>), the *Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière* (<<https://www.espaces-transfrontaliers.org/>>) and the Central European Service for Cross-border Studies (<<https://budapest.cesci-net.eu/>>), as well as the EGTC Platform of the EU's Committee of the Regions (<<https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/pages/egtc.aspx>>).

the European Commission and many state and regional governments. Therefore, it has become a powerful force in developing cross-border cooperation on all European borders and has promoted the intensification of European integration by putting cooperation programmes into practice, thus becoming a huge asset to continental cohesion (Gabbe & von Malchus, 2008).

The 1980s started with the Council of Europe's drive for cross-border cooperation via another key instrument, the Council of Europe's Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities (Council of Europe, 1980), which facilitated cooperation among the local and regional entities of many countries that signed the convention and its additional protocols. The foundations of the next landmark step, Interreg, were laid in the late 1980s; Interreg is the regulatory and financial underpinning of a process closely tied to European cohesion: territorial cooperation (Medeiros, 2008; Guillermo, 2023). The 1990s witnessed the launch of sustained, systematic and pluriannual financial aid for cooperation which still continues today. This European initiative has now been around for three decades, and the sixth edition of Interreg continues to concentrate on steering and stimulating cooperation among regions. It is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which is one of the structural funds, along with contributions by member states (Reitel & Wassenberg, 2015). The operating programmes of Interreg VI (2021–2027) are currently getting underway. Furthermore, during the period 2007–2013, a legal instrument for territorial cooperation—especially cross-border and interregional cooperation—was developed and consolidated: the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), whose regulation was approved in 2006 and was later reviewed and amended in 2013. This is yet another important milestone in cross-border cooperation in Europe, especially in terms of multilevel governance (Nadalutti, 2013). Right now, new possibilities for EGTCs are being debated, including whether or not new instruments that could respond to the diverse, complex obstacles and new needs facing cross-border cooperation in Europe should be established (Evrard, 2022).

Since the start of Interreg, which dovetailed with the fall of the Iron Curtain, cross-border cooperation mechanisms have been established targeting the Central and Eastern European countries, as part of different general EU programmes aimed at supporting these countries (PHARE, TACIS, Neighbourhood Policy, Pre-Accession, etc.). These programmes gradually got more sophisticated with the goal of supporting the future accession process in what was then the European Community, and this process was often implemented successfully thanks in part to the processes initiated in these countries' cross-border regions. The promotion of cooperation at the European Union's external borders plays a prime role in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Eastern Partnership, the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean (Celata & Coletti, 2015). Nonetheless, in the current programming period (2021–2027), all the cross-border cooperation programmes on the EU's internal and external borders are coordinated under the same initiative: Interreg. If we tally all the cross-border cooperation projects carried

out as part of these programmes on the EU's internal and external borders, the total far exceeds 20,000.³

Within Central and Eastern Europe, approaches to cross-border cooperation emerged following the staggered opening of the borders in 1989–1990, which required very careful, cautious planning (Kolosov & Więckowski, 2018). Cross-border cooperation was particularly needed on these borders, which had been ironclad for many years, to boost trust in the societies located in the states on both sides. More cooperation could lead to development improvements and offset the geographic inequalities of the border areas and the huge income, infrastructural and other disparities, especially along the EU's external borders but also among candidate countries. Furthermore, many border areas where minorities lived were facing additional problems and challenges which required particularly careful planning.

Many of these border regions also set up Euroregions or similar structures, most of which learned quickly from Western Europe's experiences and fostered cooperation with neighbouring zones in both areas on a local, regional and national scale until they joined the EU. These new internal borders were already prepared to actively participate in the operating programmes and join the normalising territorial cooperation procedure within Interreg. On the other hand, new external borders were created. The ENP was set up to aid cooperation in these new spaces, which enabled the benefits of the 2004 enlargement to be shared with the EU's new neighbouring countries and prevented the appearance of new dividing lines between them and the enlarged EU. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) was also created specifically for candidate countries. Both the ENP and the IPA included many cross-border cooperation programmes (Scott, 2006). Specific agreements were made with the Russian Federation, and similar programmes were also set up, first in four and later in six cross-border areas, in a tortuous bilateral process with the EU. These programmes with the Russian Federation were developed and renewed, even into the current programming period, although the latest phase of both previous and current programmes had to be cancelled after Russia's armed forces invaded the sovereign territory of Ukraine in late February 2022.

We should note that with the help of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership's MEDA programmes, cross-border cooperation was also fostered in the Mediterranean region with the EU's neighbouring countries. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or the 'Barcelona Process' is part of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The Union for the Mediterranean is currently the southern branch of the ENP, while the eastern branch is called the Eastern Partnership.

3. The keep.eu database (<<https://keep.eu/>>), managed by Interact, has registered a total of 26,682 projects, which account for 87 % of all Interreg projects (cross-border, transnational, interregional, etc.), 286 programmes (78 %) and 120,032 partnerships (82 %). If we search for cross-border projects, the results yield 21,625 projects, 52,529 partners, 79,538 partnerships and 226 programmes. This database has become a very useful tool in researching and analysing cross-border cooperation. It is used to build networks of similar projects, learn from others' experiences and design better projects for the future. A publication by Bruegel, a globally renowned economics think tank, not only included a European regional analysis that used keep.eu to find important data but also revealed that Interreg projects are associated with higher economic growth in the participating regions compared to regions with little or no cooperation within Interreg (Darvas, Mazza & Midões, 2019).

In view of all these experiences, we can conclude that the main reasons for cross-border cooperation are (AEBR, 1995, 2018):

- to encourage the shift in perception of the concept of borders from separation lines to meeting points for neighbours;
- to overcome mutual grudges and prejudices between peoples in border regions, which exist as a result of the historical legacy (scars from the past);
- to expand local democracy and the capacity for the regional and local administrations in border regions to act;
- to overcome these regions' status as state peripheries and their isolation;
- to promote their growth and economic development and to improve citizens' living conditions in a coordinated fashion;
- to achieve the territorial cohesion of these spaces, among them and within their states, while facilitating their countries' rapid integration into the EU (or other integration processes).

Furthermore, the political, institutional, socioeconomic and cultural added value of cross-border cooperation for the continent on the whole has been proven in numerous specific examples around Europe, as reported by different authors, particularly the AEBR (1995, 2018) and its leaders (Gabbe & von Malchus, 2008; Guillermo, 2018).

While these processes have had their ups and downs, many of them have endured and solidified throughout the different European programmes. However, as noted at the beginning of this article, the last decade or so has been particularly hard. The 2008 financial crisis ushered in nationalistic reactions by some central governments and a rise in Eurosceptic attitudes, and cross-border processes have not been immune to them. This was followed by the 2015 migration crisis, a series of border closures and the resumption of border checks, some of which are still in place today (see section 4 of the article by Feliu *et al.* in this same dossier). Since then, we have witnessed not only chaotic migration policies in a number of different countries but even the construction of border walls and fences as demarcation devices (Toğral, 2018). And these are located not only along the boundaries of what is called 'Fortress Europe' (Jünemann, Fromm & Scherer, 2019), that is, between EU member states and non-members (such as Hungary-Serbia and Latvia-Russia), but also along the EU's 'internal borders', as in Hungary-Croatia and Slovenia-Croatia, constructed in 2015. In parallel, tensions over Brexit and doubts surrounding the Irish border still linger. And in 2022, the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, decided to make good on his threats and invade Ukraine, which has also had harsh repercussions on cross-border cooperation, from the cancellation of the programmes between the EU and Russia to the effects this has had on Ukraine's western borders with the easternmost EU member states. Furthermore, the eastern regions of Finland have gone from having reasonable cooperation with Russia just months ago to closing the border and now

joining NATO. The border regions between the Russian Federation and Ukraine actually shared four Euroregions a decade ago, including in Donbas, and the AEBR even held its 2011 Annual Conference in Kursk, the capital of the Russian oblast of the same name which shares a border with the Ukrainian province of Sumy (both regions were in the Yaroslavna Euroregion) (Guillermo & Trillo, 2021).

3. The 'Cross-Border Review', the 2017 report and the Cross-border Mechanism

With the twenty-fifth anniversary of Interreg being celebrated during Luxembourg's presidency of the Council in 2015, an in-depth review was undertaken of what territorial cooperation in general and cross-border cooperation in particular meant for European cohesion. The Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) had commissioned a 'Eurobarometer on Cross-border Cooperation' in the EU, which was published in June 2015, and this enabled the 'Cross-Border Review' (CB Review) to be launched, an exercise on consultation and exchanges at all levels (European, state, regional, local, cross-border, transnational and interregional, among EU departments and institutions, with universities and civil-society organisations). Studies and pilot projects were commissioned, and a host of conferences and workshops were held in different border regions around Europe. The culmination of this CB Review was the Communication dated 21 September 2017, *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions* (EC, 2017), which proposed an action plan with ten specific initiatives. Below are some of the achievements of that Communication, even though it soon had to grapple with the pandemic and widespread border closures:

- DG REGIO's Border Focal Point (BFP). Its small team has been very active on the ground and addressed general and specific issues of cross-border interest. It has also held several thematic conferences on cross-border health, transport and employment. In recent years, it has organised an online 'Beyond Borders: Breakfast Debates' series on different matters of interest; the last one, held on 1 June 2023, kicked off a second season on the topic of 'life in the border regions'.
- The online network of professionals. Although it is not yet heavily used, it is a very useful tool for exchanging information, questions and answers, sharing information and keeping abreast of calls for applications, consultations and surveys: <<https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/border-regions>>.
- b-solutions. The overall goal of this initiative, managed by the AEBR for DG REGIO since 2018, is to identify and promote sustainable methods for resolving legal or administrative border obstacles along the EU's internal borders, alongside EFTA and the candidate (pre-accession) countries. Specifically, b-solutions is geared at cases where interactions across the

border are more difficult either because of a lack of cohesion between the applicable laws on either side or incongruences or overlaps among the different administrative procedures, or even because the applicable laws do not take into account the specificity of cross-border interactions.

The main expected outcomes of *b-solutions* are lessons learned and recommendations on public policies for decision-making, with the goal of promoting better European integration (Medeiros *et al.*, 2022b). Indeed, *b-solutions* now offers:

- Solutions to specific legal and administrative obstacles which have been analysed, based on case studies, and which can be reproduced and are readily available and promoted in other European regions.
- Innovative proposals which can inform future developments and the launch of new approaches.
- Evidence of a greater exchange of information and commitment among different administrative levels in border areas, and of joint initiatives which entail some degree of multilevel governance across borders.
- A better understanding of the specific obstacles and possible solutions by key stakeholders at the local, regional, national and European level.

An initial two-volume compendium was published during the first phase (2018–2021): the first included the methodology, different thematic analyses and the preliminary conclusions (AEBR-EC, 2020a), while the second is an annex with summaries of the reports on the ten pilot actions and the first 33 cases (AEBR-EC, 2020b). A second compendium contained summaries of the reports of the next 47 cases (AEBR-EC, 2021a), which resulted in a total of 90 obstacles analysed. Furthermore, three thematic brochures were produced which analysed the obstacles and common solutions in the following fields: i) public cross-border services (AEBR-EC, 2021b); ii) education and employment (AEBR-EC, 2021c); and iii) the European Green Deal (AEBR-EC, 2021d), as well as a publication with seven stories on the impact of certain cross-border obstacles on people's lives (AEBR-EC, 2021e). Articles based on the results of *b-solutions* have also been published in specialised journals, such as, for instance, articles debating the impact of this initiative on facilitating cross-border mobility to work, engage in tourism, shop or seek a particular service (Medeiros *et al.*, 2022a).

The AEBR is overseeing a second phase, *b-solutions 2.0*, between January 2022 and September 2024 in the wake of DG REGIO's announcement in the Commission report entitled *EU Border Regions: Living labs of European integration* (EC, 2021). This second phase aims to identify 120 new cases encompassing all the EU's internal land and sea borders and the borders with the EFTA and candidate countries, and it has a special chapter promoting around 30 solutions. The call for proposals is open until November 2023, along with another call for experts who wish to participate by providing a case analysis. All the border mayors of the eligible regions

(more than 12,000 of them) were contacted in their own language to invite them to participate, and another call for participation is aimed at citizens so they can submit obstacles they deal with as a consequence of living and working in a border region. All of these calls, the documentation produced and direct testimonials by the people involved can be found on the website <<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>>.

Despite these measures to promote cooperation, there are still doubts as to the future of the cohesion policy in general and territorial cooperation in particular. One sign of this tendency can be glimpsed in initiatives like the ‘European Cross-Border Mechanism’ (ECBM) (Evrard, 2022), which deserves further attention. This mechanism, which began being promoted in 2015 during Luxembourg’s presidency of the Council, is the outcome of systematic work carried out by the border regions, the European Commission, the Committee of the Regions and some EU member states. The goal was for the EU to have a legal instrument with which it could solve some of the issues impacting cross-border cooperation across different fields (infrastructure, public services, etc.). Even though this is clearly a paradigm shift (Engl & Evrard, 2019), it is a voluntary instrument exclusive to the member states which would make it possible to repeal a state law in certain cases or apply the law of the neighbouring country (in a very specific, limited territory) in certain specific cases in which a law would prevent or hinder a cross-border cooperation project.

Once the Commission had the proposal ready and submitted in May 2018, several member states (ES, SE, HR, EE) immediately expressed their qualms, although it also received unre-served support from three others (FR, LU, HU), while the majority took a softer position (DK, BE, CZ, FI, PL, IT, AT) or even expressed indifference (LT, BG, SI). The German presidency promoted it in the second half of 2020 within the context of the debate on the European Territorial Agenda 2030, the strengthening of cross-border cooperation in light of the pandemic, border closures and their subsequent openings, etc. All signs seemed to indicate that it might be approved during the Portuguese presidency in the first half of 2021. However, Spain once again expressed its disagreement, and it ended up leading the anti-ECBM group and arousing doubts in states that had previously been indifferent, including Portugal. The legislative work in the Council was halted and the procedure was sent back to the Commission so it could withdraw the proposal or scale it back to such an extent that it would no longer make sense.

Despite this, the European Parliament (EP) continued to defend the instrument. Based on a question by Euro-MP Ignacio Sánchez Amor in mid-2022, debate in the EP’s Regional Development Committee (REGI) once again resumed, and in late April 2023 it issued a draft report which asked the Commission to prepare a regulation for the new instrument, called the *Border Regions’ Instrument for Development and Growth in the EU* (BridgeEU) (REGI, 2023). We shall come back to this issue in the last section.

4. Cross-border cooperation during times of COVID

The COVID pandemic stormed onto the scene at a time when the Commission was making headway in reviewing the impacts of the territorial cooperation policy, especially its cross-border policy, as discussed above. We wanted to devote a specific section to this because it served as the seed of a vast trove of scholarly research revolving around the present and future of cross-border cooperation in an open debate within border studies.

COVID has sparked a plethora of studies in different fields examining aspects like health, international relations, food safety, tourism, migration, economics, governance and regional integration processes (Swinnen & McDermott, 2020; Webb *et al.*, 2021; Brunn & Gillbreath, 2022; OECD, 2022). In this last field, projects that seemed consolidated, like European integration, were soon questioned (Ocskay *et al.*, 2022); the response to the pandemic came first from nation states, who chose to close state borders and impose mobility restrictions. Given the lack of a collective EU response, the states decided to reinforce their perimeters to prevent the virus from being transmitted, thus interrupting the Schengen Area (Opiłowska, 2021; Friedery, 2022). These decisions were shown to be largely ineffective (Emeto, Alele & Ilesanmi, 2021), but they revealed just how entrenched the territorial conception of the state, which has to be protected and safeguarded, still was. Agnew's insightful thesis on the 'territorial trap' came to the fore once again (Agnew, 1994, cf. Wisaijorn, 2019), and ad-hoc terms like 'covidfencing' were coined (Medeiros *et al.*, 2021) to account for these border closure policies in reaction to the pandemic. What is more, those were times of re-bordering not only on the state scale but also at infrastate scales through a range of lockdown policies at different levels: in the home, in neighbourhoods, in towns, in healthcare regions, between provinces/regions/states, etc. (Trillo, Vila & Paül, 2022). Thus, a host of re-bordering processes appeared in record time which were a stark wake-up call to the fact that the obsolete thesis of the borderless world (Ohmae, 1991) is still just a utopian dream. Furthermore, different theses appeared that posited the emergence of a new post-pandemic world order (Radil, Castan & Ptak, 2021).

What is of most interest for this article is the examination of the impact of the policies enacted to counter the COVID crisis in border areas. The amount of research on this topic has also risen dramatically (Scott, 2021; BIG Review, 2021; Lara-Valencia & Laine, 2022). Even though quite a few publications discuss the migration crisis (Koca, 2018), the effects of COVID have drawn the most scholarly attention in the past three years. We can find studies using both qualitative methods, especially semi-structured interviews (Giacometti & Meijer, 2021; Novotný & Böhm, 2022) and Delphi (Hippe *et al.*, 2022), and quantitative methods, like the ones that examine social media interactions to measure mobility (Aagesen, Järv & Gerber, 2022) or calculate the economic impact of the international border closure (Paül *et al.*, 2022).

It is interesting to note the broad spectrum of theories that can be identified in these publications. For example, Opiola and Böhm (2022) analyse the role played by the Euroregions on the border between Germany and the Czech Republic using 'deliberative system theory'. The authors

believe that the Euroregions were able to react to the policies imposed by the central states because they are public-sphere institutions. This is viewed as the consequence of the central governments' non-deliberative (top-down) actions, as opposed to the response from Euroregion structures, which were based on bottom-up deliberative processes. In turn, Katja and Opiłowska (2021) use the 'strategic-relational approach', following Jessop's (2001) postulates, to analyse what happened in the context of the twin cities Frankfurt an der Oder and Słubice (Germany-Poland), and Cieszyn and Český Těšín (Poland-Czech Republic). Medeiros (2021) seeks to understand the mechanisms of an essential cross-border cooperation, which is even stronger since the effects of the pandemic, using the concept of 'institutional trust', while Hippie, Bertram and Chilla (2022) do so by drawing on the concept of 'resilience'. Based on previous studies, Scott (2021) advocates addressing cross-border cooperation through concepts like 'spatial justice' and 'place-based development', because the author states that it is essential to generate 'opportunity and more responsive provision of public goods and services to communities across borders' (Scott, 2021: 91), given that 'thinking about European cohesion from the perspective of borders and borderlands highlights the urgency of a place-sensitive development philosophy more globally' (Scott, 2021: 91). Finally, Böhm (2021) proposes a specific analytical framework that gives cross-border cooperation five roles to help stop re-bordering processes in post-COVID times: 1) multilevel governance, 2) regional development, 3) para-diplomacy, 4) post-conflict reconciliation and 5) European construction.

Many topics have been studied, although a handful have drawn considerable attention because of their repercussions on daily lives on the border. One example is cross-border commuting, which was halted from one day to the next (Novotný & Böhm, 2022; Haist & Novotný, 2023). There has also been a strong emphasis on the role played by cross-border institutions in managing the pandemic (Hippie *et al.*, 2022; Katja & Opiłowska, 2022; Opiola & Böhm, 2022), the majority based on particular case studies. However, multisectoral research based on multiple case studies has also been conducted, such as in the Nordic countries (Giacometti & Meijer, 2021), or with a broader view of Europe as a whole (MOT, 2021). This latter study could serve as a thermometer with which to measure the impact of COVID in border areas and the solutions taken by different actors at different scales.

The MOT document, which was published in June 2020, sought to measure the immediate impact of COVID on border areas. Thus, in addition to using sources from the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions, it also conducted interviews with actors in different cooperation structures and enlisted the support of the AEBR and the Central European Service for Cross-border Studies (CESCI). After outlining the measures taken by the EU member states and other neighbouring states, the document analyses the impact of these measures on border territories and societies in the following categories: mobility, public transport, cross-border workers, cross-border services, economic activities, sociocultural activities and individual impact. In another section, it turns to analysing the role played by the cross-border cooperation structures during the first wave of the pandemic. Six major areas were identified:

1) lobbying with central state authorities to draw attention to specific problems in cross-border areas; 2) coordinating crisis management among the different territorial scales (local, regional, state); 3) providing cross-border inhabitants and workers with information; 4) undertaking surveys to identify the main obstacles and their impact on inhabitants; 5) keeping up the spirit of cooperation in difficult times; and 6) developing recovery plans.

Based on its analysis of the different measures and initiatives launched, the document proposes a series of lessons to bear in mind to ensure that cross-border cooperation comes out stronger. First, on the local scale of border areas, it considers bearing their inhabitants' needs in mind through a territorial concept based on borders not as spaces of rupture but as critical areas of cross-border living area. Secondly, the document deems it essential to reinforce multilevel government coordination that accepts the complexity and diversity of borders, promotes bottom-up approaches and takes into account the fact that the central government scale is still important. Thirdly, it asks for harmonisation in the management of border crises at the EU level to reinforce the inter-scale EU-state-region cross-border agreements.

In short, the COVID pandemic was a challenge to cross-border cooperation in Europe. Given the nation states' border closures and their impact on the inhabitants of (cross-)border areas, local territorial authorities and cooperation structures sprang into action and became mouth-pieces to advocate for the problems that arose.

5. *Quo vadis, cross-border cooperation?*

Despite the migration crisis, COVID and the invasion of Ukraine, the authorities in border and cross-border regions continue to work actively: cross-border cooperation programmes for the period 2013–2020 have just closed, in some cases with many difficulties given the challenges they had to deal with, while new programmes for the 2021–2027 period have begun, some of them with a considerable delay—which is natural due to the closure of the previous programmes. And progress is being made on the innovations introduced in this new programming period: the establishment of a fund for small person-to-person projects, new specific Interreg objectives for better governance and a safer Europe, and thematic concentrations.

Nonetheless, asymmetries, incongruences and the lack of integration in many aspects of life in border regions are still persistent, as is evident in the above sections, especially in reference to *b-solutions*. Another shortcoming is the excessive dependence on European funds for cross-border cooperation to occur in many cases, which can turn the EGTC into a mere fundraising instrument. Furthermore, there are still cooperation structures in different settings that work as mirrors, in the sense that there are no shared institutions with actors from both sides of the border but instead two parallel structures. For all these reasons, in the period 2021–2027, the impact of regional policies is expected to coalesce in border areas, with a true cross-border dimension and innovative approaches that should be reproducible in other similar areas.

IMAGE 1

Sighetu Marmatiei border point between Romania and Ukraine, June 2023



SOURCE: Press Office of Maramureş County Council.

There is no doubt that one instrument which will likely be essential to the future of cross-border cooperation is the revival of the ‘European Cross-Border Mechanism’ (ECBM), as mentioned above. The draft by the European Parliament’s REGI Committee was published in April 2023 and is expected to be approved by the Parliament’s plenary by the end of the year. This renewed instrument (proposed as BridgeEU) would not be obligatory for member states and underscores the importance of getting local and regional authorities involved. It is based on the work done by the European institutions and other entities in recent years that have revealed the need for such an instrument. One of the most cited initiatives is *b-solutions*, which is considered ‘a success’ in this draft; it is mentioned a dozen times in the preamble and case studies (three out of four are *b-solutions*). It recommends setting up Cross-Border Coordination Points associated with central governments, which could decide when and how to use the mechanism on a case-by-case basis. This draft bore in mind the evaluation of the European added-value of this Cross-Border Mechanism prepared by the European Parliament’s research service and made public in May 2023 (Jančová & Kammerhofer-Schlegel, 2023), which identifies and evaluates three options: (1) *status quo* (like *b-solutions*, EGTC, BFP, etc.); (2) soft legal measures (boosting awareness and capacities); and (3) adopting a new legislative instrument (ECBM 2.0). The third option would have the most impact when addressing legal and administrative obstacles. This evaluation also frequently cites *b-solutions* (Jančová & Kammerhofer-Schlegel, 2023).

The COTER Commission (Territorial Cohesion Policy and the EU Budget) of the Committee of the Regions has drafted (June 2023) a statement on this instrument, which naturally considers the Parliament's work, along with testimonials from its members (local and regional authorities throughout Europe) and on-the-ground studies conducted by the Commission and interested platforms and associations. The CoR plenary has to approve it by the end of 2023, too. In turn, the Commission also seems to have a renewed interest in the issue, and it may present a new version of it in 2023 based on the requests of the Parliament and the CoR.

In this sense, it is interesting to note that just as the Cross-Border Mechanism was vanishing in 2021, the Commission presented an assessment of implementing the action plan included in the Communication dated 21 September 2017, *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions* (EC, 2017). In its report on border regions as 'living labs of European integration' (EC, 2021), the Commission analysed the status of cross-border cooperation in the EU and highlighted the new priorities and efforts to be made in the forthcoming years to support the border regions. The point of departure was the main lesson learned: cross-border regions are still vulnerable to the decisions taken by states, and this affects their readiness to react to crises. The COVID pandemic, as analysed above, showed that the more integrated a region is with its neighbours, the quicker and better it can respond to citizens' needs, in times of crisis, too. The new priorities would be:

- Boosting institutional cooperation, strengthening cross-border governance, promoting the EGTC and focusing on legal frameworks to resolve border obstacles;
- Developing cross-border public services via digitalisation and interoperability;
- Improving cross-border job markets to bring employment on both sides of the border closer together, with a focus on accessibility/mobility, taxpaying, job offers, recognition of qualifications, education and training;
- Launching the Green Deal via cross-border cooperation with coherent joint strategies that protect biodiversity, maintain ecological corridors and natural parks, plan measures for energy efficiency and the distribution of renewable energies and allow for the integration of energy grids.

The Commission announced specific objectives and called on other European institutions to help work towards the shared goal of promoting European integration through its cross-border regions. As stated above, these promising steps include the continuation of *b-solutions*, key in increasing the number of innovative solutions available for border regions. The report concluded that 'it is time to step up cross-border cooperation on all fronts, in all sectors and across sectors' (EC, 2021), turning cross-border regions into core actors in European integration and bringing in the cross-border regions in the candidate countries for EU accession.

DG REGIO continues its efforts to ensure other EC Directorates-General are involved in cross-border cooperation with the goal of identifying and offering solutions to cross-border

obstacles, while encouraging regional and other actors to join this process. One example is DG SANTE (Health and Food Safety), with which it organised a conference in Brussels in December 2018, which featured an interesting contribution from EUREGHA (European Regional and Local Health Authorities) and different studies and other initiatives carried out during the pandemic. A new conference on cross-border transport was held the following year in conjunction with DG MOVE (Mobility and Transport). The lockdown due to the pandemic prevented large face-to-face conferences from being held, but the online ‘Beyond Borders: Breakfast Debates’ mentioned above were launched, which most of the EU, state, regional, municipal organisations have been invited to attend, along with associations, universities and other organisations. The next large face-to-face thematic conference, on cross-border job markets, was held in January 2023.

On the other hand, the systematic study of the existence of cross-border public services that has been carried out by ESPON since 2018 (ESPON, 2019) entails the collaboration of not only Europe’s cross-border cooperation networks but also researchers and, of course, other departments in the Commission. The last inventory yields the figure of 1,533 cross-border public services in Europe today (ESPON, 2022). There are other initiatives promoted by different organisations underway as well; for example the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and research and cooperation consortia and networks are analysing issues like functional cross-border spaces, specific measures to facilitate job markets and the simplification of procedures.

Furthermore, cross-border cooperation among different central governments is worth highlighting. The aforementioned case of Luxembourg should be joined by Hungary’s steadfast support for its many EGTCs, and France’s support by means of the Treaty of Aachen with Germany, along with other bilateral or multilateral agreements. Different German ministries have also shown a keen interest in supporting cooperation and associated organisations, especially Interior and Foreign Affairs. In April 2023, the latter published three studies on the concepts included in the December 2021 Coalition Agreement: *Grenzscouts*⁴ (border scouts) (Cyrus, 2023), *Experimentierklauseln*⁵ (experimental clauses) (Frey & Müller, 2023) and *Regionalräte*⁶ (regional councils) (Chilla & Lambrach, 2023), while Interior has allocated a small budget for better connection among cross-border cooperation actors for 2024–2026.

We should bear in mind that cross-border cooperation is not exclusive to the European Union and has also made progress in other settings. For instance, the African Union Border Programme is making headway despite the many factors deterring it and more pressing continental priorities,

4. This is a complex concept that analyses the support that the border and cross-border regions receive from different sources, like learning better from other experiences and identifying structural strengths and weaknesses in order to further the development of these regions.

5. *Experimentierklauseln*, experimental clauses, legal instruments to facilitate cross-border cooperation. They do not exist yet, but there is extraordinary political will to promote them in both the executive and the *Bundestag*.

6. *Regionalräte*, cross-border councils, with questions on their organisation, competences, results, etc.

and other processes are underway in numerous border areas in Latin America. The AEBR has been mentoring these initiatives for more than a decade, both those associated with integration processes, particularly the Andean Community (CAN), MERCOSUR and the Central American Integration System (SICA), and well-established bilateral or trilateral processes. States remain extraordinarily important, but the role of the private sector and civil society is also telling. More or less institutionalised structures are being fashioned, and there is starting to be sustained cooperation on many borders despite political fluctuations. The many experiences and approaches tested in Latin America as part of international cooperation projects between European and Latin American regions have led to the coining of the term ‘cross-border development cooperation’ (Bendelac & Guillermo, 2019; Bendelac, Guillermo & Trillo, 2021; Guillermo *et al.*, 2022).

To conclude, we should stress the importance of cross-border cooperation as a kind of local policy that takes the needs of the populations directly affected by state boundaries into consideration. Even though borders can be used as a resource (Sohn, 2022), such as by taking advantage of price differences to shop on either side, they continue to pose a host of obstacles owing to the concurrence of two or more state regulatory frameworks. Overcoming these barriers facilitates the daily lives of thousands of people who live in border areas. COVID showed that everyday work, family and entertainment in cross-border areas were interrupted from one day to the next due to decisions taken in power centres far away. The need to continue the policies established in cross-border regions while promoting a bottom-up approach and allowing for the participation of the actors closely associated with the local world is considered essential in making headway towards the much yearned-for processes of European integration and cohesion.

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