

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN EUROPE

József FOGARASI^{a,b}

^a Professor, Óbuda University, Keleti Károly Faculty of Business and Management, 1084 Budapest, Tavaszmező u. 17., fogarasi.jozsef@kgk.uni-obuda.hu

^b Full Professor, Partium Christian University, 410209 Oradea, str. Primăriei nr. 27, fogarasi@partium.ro

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Abstract

Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) has become a cornerstone of European Union regional policy, promoting integration and addressing disparities across border regions. This paper critically examines the motivations, patterns, and outcomes of CBC initiatives in Europe, focusing on the interplay between normative drivers, such as shared cultural values, and instrumental motivations, such as access to Interreg funding. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence, the study uncovers regional heterogeneity in CBC practices, highlighting East-West and North-South dynamics as well as differences between Old and New Member States.

The research identifies both enabling factors and structural barriers to effective CBC. While institutionalized forms of cooperation often facilitate sustainable development and knowledge transfer, challenges such as administrative inefficiencies, cognitive distances, and funding-driven initiatives frequently undermine long-term effectiveness. The analysis also emphasizes the untapped potential of CBC in addressing strategic policy challenges, including sustainability, innovation, and rural development.

The findings have significant policy implications. To enhance the effectiveness of CBC, policymakers must align funding mechanisms with strategic regional goals, foster local governance capacities, and address structural disparities in cross-border collaboration. By proposing actionable recommendations, this paper contributes to the discourse on designing more effective and inclusive CBC frameworks, offering insights for academics and practitioners seeking to improve the integration and resilience of Europe's border regions.

Keywords: cross-border cooperation, institutionalized cooperation, non-institutionalized cooperation, CBC in agriculture and forestry

INTRODUCTION

Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) is a pivotal component of the European Union's regional development strategy, designed to transform border regions into dynamic socio-economic spaces and promote European integration. Defined by the Interreg program as a means to “fill the gaps” in regional disparities (Leibenath, 2008), CBC aims to foster collaboration across national boundaries by addressing shared challenges and leveraging mutual opportunities. Despite its significance, the effectiveness and sustainability of CBC initiatives remain

contested, with outcomes often shaped by diverse historical, institutional, and socio-economic factors (Perkmann, 2003; Svensson, 2014).

The academic discourse highlights CBC's dual role as both a practical tool for solving cross-border issues and a symbolic driver of European identity. For example, normative motivations, such as shared cultural values and historical ties, often coexist with instrumental drivers like financial incentives or policy requirements (March & Olsen, 1989; Svensson, 2014). However, this duality can lead to tensions where partnerships are driven more by funding availability than by genuine collaborative objectives. These challenges underscore the importance of critically examining the motivations and mechanisms underlying CBC initiatives.

This paper contributes to the field by synthesizing theoretical insights with empirical evidence to provide a nuanced analysis of CBC in Europe. It emphasizes regional heterogeneity, exploring the significant contrasts between Old and New Member States as well as East-West and North-South dynamics (Bufon & Markelj, 2010). While many studies have focused on specific border regions, this research adopts a broader perspective, analyzing both institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of cooperation and their implications for governance, knowledge transfer, and sustainable development (Perkmann & Sum, 2002; Van Den Broek & Smulders, 2013).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on under-researched aspects of CBC, such as its potential in advancing sustainable practices in agriculture, forestry, and rural development. By addressing these dimensions, the research identifies structural barriers, such as administrative inefficiencies and cognitive distances, that limit the effectiveness of CBC (Lundquist & Tripple, 2013). It also highlights the need for more robust policy frameworks that balance financial incentives with the strategic goals of fostering regional integration and innovation.

This study offers significant policy implications. Enhancing local governance capacities, fostering institutional innovation, and aligning funding mechanisms with long-term regional objectives are critical to unlocking the full potential of CBC. By integrating these elements, policymakers can design more effective and sustainable cooperation models. The following sections examine the historical evolution of borders, analyze empirical findings, and propose actionable recommendations for strengthening CBC frameworks across Europe.

BORDERS AND REGIONS

The analysis of Cross-Border Co-operation (CBC) is rooted in the larger domain of border studies that approaches the investigation of border regions from a multitude of aspects

applying cross-disciplinary theoretical and empirical methods (Brunet-Jailly, 2022). The plethora of papers focusing on country-border studies from a multitude of cross-disciplinary aspects, has greatly enriched the literature, yet ‘obscured what a border is’ (Johnson et al., 2011). Since it is not our goal to search for a ‘best’ definition or create a synthesis of existing ones, we start by surveying some ‘common sense’ approaches rooted in different disciplines from geographical-historical to economic-institutional-social and even psychological.

The past two centuries were characterized by the obsession with borders, the domination of national states, national economies and societies. Whilst in the nineteenth century, Europe experienced a process of territorial consolidation, leading to the creation of large countries, the end of the First World War broke up the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Tsarist empires into a large number of smaller states. The heydays of national states were between the 1920s and 1970s, an era characterized by protectionism and development closed within borders (Anderson et al., 2005). The 1990s brought a new series of emerging new countries with the dissolutions of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, creating 12,880 km of new borders in CEEC (O’Dowd, 2003). Bufon and Merkelj (2010) present a typology of borders, based on their *location*. Thus, one may differentiate between Western European, Central European and Eastern European borders. Western European borders are characterized by so called ‘old borders’, many of which existed before the actual modern state was created. This is where early forms of CBC were manifested first – as mostly bottom-up initiatives meant to solve actual policy challenges – thus, Western Europe may be labeled as the ‘*Region of regions*’. In Central Europe borders are the results of the two World Wars. Thus, historical regions do not match state borders, cross-border links are motivated by existing ethnic and socio-cultural ties. Importantly, ‘these cross-border areas do not fit the administrative spaces, rather match the previously existing historical regions; also, they do not enjoy any institutional support from the local or state authorities, which at times even resent cross-border cooperation because of unresolved issues between the neighboring states that were caused by the partition processes’ (Bufon & Merkelj, 2010). Central Europe thus can be labeled as ‘*Regions within regions*’. Eastern Europe is characterized by a mix of ‘old’ and ‘new’ borders which are less developed and less populated compared to the central state than their Western and Central European counterparts. Here border regions possess ‘very limited possibilities of creating more intense forms of cross-border cooperation and (re)integration’. A self-describing name would be ‘*Regions under reconstruction*’. To emphasize the scale of disruption caused by the two World Wars, it took 57 years to reach the same level of cross-border flows in people, capital and commodities as in 1913 (O’Dowd, 2003). The change in

perception began with the accession to power of neoliberal politicians in Western Europe, who viewed borders as market distortions, even if the classical barriers to trade such as quotas and tariffs were not implemented (the impact of borders in empirical works is often modeled as increased ‘distance’). Perhaps O’Dowd (2003) is the one who emphasizes the recent evolution of European borders in the most intuitive way: the initial borders as barriers perception is transformed to *borders as bridges* then *borders as resources* and *borders as symbols of identity*.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

Definitions and historical evolution

For the evolution of formal CBC in Europe, two different perspectives were promoted by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. The scheme put forward by the Council favored integration based on a ‘more legalistic approach’, which was less successful than the pragmatic and economically oriented approach within the EU’s regional policy (Perkmann, 2003). European regional policy is based on Article 158 of the Treaty establishing the European Community. Thus, the CBCs discussed here, with a few exceptions, are Commission promoted models under the auspice of its regional development policy. The definitions of CBC are not simple, as emphasized by some authors (e.g. Lundquist and Tripple, 2013), who argue that due to the involvement of several nations, partnership between public and also private actors, and a strong reliance on networking – it is a ‘grey zone’ process between civil and public law combined with formal and informal networks of all possible actors including citizens, townships, companies, universities, cultural organizations or public utility providers. Possibly, the simplest definition is given by Perkmann and Sum (2002): ‘A CBR - i.e. *Cross-Border Region* - is a territorial unit that comprises contiguous sub-national units from two or more nation states’. Eibler et al. (2014) quote the Association of European Border Regions listing the following principles for defining CBC: partnership, subsidiarity, joint CBC development or cooperation, as well as the existence of joint regional or local structures, and own sources of co-funding. A different (political) perspective is highlighted by Johnson (2009), namely that cross-border cooperation is becoming a key policy tool for localities and other territories that ‘strive to become global’. The traditional approach of neoclassical economics in border studies (i.e. borders acting as barriers to trade by widening physical distance and the concept of asymmetrical relations such as commuter labor flows between Germany and Poland), is supplemented in Perkmann and Sum (2002) by

a combination of inter- and post-disciplinary perspectives such as anthropology and psychology (analyzing the subjective determinants of CBC). It would be wrong to presume that cross-border regions are governed in a traditional, ‘territorial sense’, instead they are governed in a networked manner on at least two levels (Perkmann & Sum, 2002): the micro-level, where integration depends on the proliferation of personal and/or social and/or economic relationships; and the meso-level with the involvement and cooperation between public, private and other bodies (e.g. NGOs). The latter emerges when common cross-border interest arises, and actors take advantage of regionalization and globalization processes. Many of these, however, only appear as a response to the policy and financial incentives of the European Commission. A more formal definition is provided by Perkmann (2003): ‘cross-border cooperation can be defined as a more or less institutionalized collaboration between contiguous subnational authorities across national borders.’ Operationalizing the definition, the following four criteria emerge: (i) main actors are always public authorities, (ii) the cooperation between subnational actors on both sides of the border is not governed by international law, (iii) CBC’s main purpose is ‘problem-solving in a broad range of fields of everyday administrative life’ and (iv) CBC ‘involves a certain stabilization of cross-border contacts’.

In the light of Perkmann’s (2003) definition above, it would be misleading to consider only physical distance when discussing the concept of regional proximity, leading to CBC. The ‘proximity school’ (Lundquist & Tripple, 2013), distinguishes three main types of proximity: *physical proximity* (the geographical dimension – the essence of agglomeration, transaction costs and transportation economies), *functional* (innovation capacity and performance) and *relational proximities* (the non-tangible characteristics such as shared norms, similar institutions, mutual understanding and trust, technological collaboration and knowledge exchange). The relation or balance between the proximities listed above is rather complex. Lundquist and Tripple (2013) use a combination of different proximities, to define three stages of cross-border integration: *weakly integrated systems*, *semi-integrated systems* and *strongly integrated systems*. Physical distance and some institutional barriers between cooperating entities are relatively easy to break down, the *cognitive distance* – including cultural, traditional and linguistic barriers are much more persistent. The pioneers of CBC emerged in the industrial Rhine basin to respond to local needs (such as land-use planning, pollution, industrial decline, trans-border commuting) less than 15 years after the termination of the Second World War. The showcase of European CBC is the EUREGIO established in 1958 with its own cross-border office since 1971, and in continuous evolution ever since. A

number of further Rhine basin regional cooperation followed involving Dutch, German, Belgian, Swiss and French border regions. Regio Basiliensis, established in 1962 is a tri-national cooperation between Baden-Württemberg, Basel and Southern Alsace. By looking at a map, it is easy to understand why cooperation between these regions was not top-down instrumental links based, these regions were culturally and economically linked way before modern Switzerland, Germany and France emerged, moreover, a significant share of inhabitants speak a common German, Alemannic dialect (O'Dowd, 2003). The EUREGIO is still the subject of several border studies or CBC papers. According to Perkmann (2007b), the success is due to three factors. First, *political mobilization*, with a view to creating a joint political regional platform capable of leveraging higher level authorities in order to attract attention and resources (Church & Reid, 1996). Second, *governance building* at the intersection of local networks (e.g. authorities) and vertical networks (higher-level authorities). And finally, *strategic unification* 'inspired by a shared vision around building a 'functional unit' ... for cross-policy measures in 'all spheres of life''. After the end of the Cold War, in the 1990s, and later on, with the accession of the New Member States (NMSs), another favorable condition of cross-border cooperation emerged as a result of which currently practically all intra-European border regions are part of some kind of CBC. Consequently, CBC has been extending, more than 70 cross-border regions were active in the 2000s in Europe according to the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), these function under names such as 'Euroregions' (more than 150 at that time), 'Euregios' or 'Working Communities' (Perkmann & Sum, 2002). The number of cross-border-regions and Euroregions in the 2020s has increased to around 100 and 209, respectively (AEBR, 2023; Kaucic & Sohn, 2022). All European borders (internal or external) form part of at least one Euroregion, with more than two-thirds located along the southern and eastern borders (Svensson, 2014). It is important to note (as discussed further), that Euroregions are not legal personalities, the typical Euroregion is created by separate national institutions on both sides of the border, according to local (state) law, linked through an international treaty that creates the Euroregion in question. This process and the lack of own legal personality is often seen as their main weakness (Husák, 2010). In spite of that, Euroregions are relevant organizations, which can stimulate the soft institutionalization of re-territorialization and can be perceived as complementary to conventional state-level intervention (Noferini et al., 2020). There is a likely tendency for the standardization of Euroregions (their set up, management, policy implementation) by becoming more similar across Europe. Two parallel legal tools were introduced by the EU and the Council of Europe, i.e. the European Grouping of Territorial

Cooperation (EGTC) and the European Euroregional Co-operation Grouping (ECG). Medve-Bálint and Svensson (2013) note that these tools are indirectly pushing Euroregions towards standardization. Thus, during the 2007-2013 programming period, member states *could* use EGTC for the management of EU funds dedicated to CBC, whilst in 2014-2020, ‘these institutions *should*, where appropriate, be involved’ (Medve-Bálint & Svensson, 2013, pp. 16). Whilst the differences across border regions providing opportunities for complementarities and synergies are the bases of CBC, the heterogeneity of regions, more precisely, the magnitude and character of their heterogeneity with respect to cross-border regions has a strong impact on the possibilities and the probability of the emergence of an integrated socio-economic region (Lundquist & Triple, 2013).

Non-institutionalized cooperation

It would be misleading to imagine CBC only as project or fund based and institutionally governed. On the one hand, informal economic border activities (co-operations) are highlighted by Xheneti et al. (2012), emphasizing the impact of EU enlargement on Informal Entrepreneurial Activities (IAEs) on soft and hard borders using qualitative interview data. Since the majority of border regions in NMSs are economically deprived regions characterized by low purchase power, IAEs were encouraged to take advantage of the border location (from 1990 onwards until the enlargement process). Contrary to previous studies, formal cross-border-cooperation at firm level - but without the institutional and financial background provided by EU policies - is emphasized by Huber (2003) analysing the determinants of CBC for Austrian firms with partners from Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs). The post-1990 opening of the formerly state-run CEEC economies prompted a mutually beneficial internationalization (e.g. in 1998, 30% of Austria’s FDI was directed to CEECs). By using firm level data, Huber in his paper applies an appropriate econometric analysis to identify the factors that affect firms’ decision to engage in CBC. Results emphasize a positive relationship between firm size, previous experience with cooperation, level of business integration with the partner and decision to cooperate, and a (weak) negative relationship in certain cooperation forms when distance to the closest potential partner is considered. CBC between professional organizations (police, fire brigades, emergency health services, etc.) is discussed in Princen et al. (2014), who argue that national differences in legal, organizational and cultural backgrounds are overcome by ‘street-level professionals’ looking for solutions to actual pragmatic problems. Somewhat similarly, yet with different conclusions, as an example where regional cooperation is far below its

potential, a recent paper by Svensson (2016) illustrates the role of CBCs – defined as ‘primarily responding to policy problems that cannot be dealt with effectively within the national context’ – in effective health policy across Euroregions. The conclusions however are disappointing, as the analysis relying on surveys conducted among city mayors within 6 Euroregions suggest frustration, for *institutional inappropriateness* and *cognitive distances* hamper delivering effective health policy.

Aspects of Cross-Border Cooperation – economic and political geography perspective

Sohn et al. (2009) discuss the cross-border integration of metropolitan areas (an example of CBC not relying on the cooperation of geographically marginalized regions) from aspects rooted in economic geography. Three demographically comparably-sized areas are studied: the regions around Geneva, Luxembourg and Basel – all small metropolitan centers which however play a higher role due to hosting European, international institutions and global multinational companies and strong knowledge bases. Luxembourg is in the historic core of the European integration process, and along with Geneva, is predominantly characterized by tertiary activities, whilst Basel has a strong secondary sector. Yet there are major differences between how Luxembourg and the Swiss cities organize their cross-border regions. Most notably, in Luxembourg there is no metropolitan sized organization, whilst Geneva and Basel developed original forms of governance that promote the international character of the metropolitan centers. Given the differences among these regions, the authors conclude that ‘there does not necessarily have to be a link between the intensity of socio-economic interactions and the extent of the cooperation instigated by the territorial institutions’ (Sohn et al., 2009).

Aspects of cross-border co-operation – conflict amelioration

Whilst most papers reviewed – whilst admitting deficiencies – are optimistic, or at worst, neutral with respect to CBC, McCall (2013) discusses the issue from a radically different perspective: to what extent the CBC in the EU and its role in conflict amelioration may be questioned in the presence of ‘dark globalization’. According to the paper, the concept of ‘cross-border cooperation and the reconfiguration of borders from hard security barriers to places for contact and communication appears to belong to the ‘naïve pre-2001 era’ in the light of global threats such as terrorism or illegal migration’. McCall (2013) argues that CBC is ‘integral to conflict amelioration’ since it works for loosening the national state’s grip on borders and promotes inter-cultural and inter-communal relations. Whilst there were no armed

conflicts within the EU or along its external borders at the time the paper was published (the recent Ukraine conflict and pressure generated by illegal immigration are however excellent examples underpinning the argumentation of the paper), he proceeds by highlighting ethno-national and cultural (at present) ‘dormant’ issues including those between Estonia and Russia, Cyprus, Ireland, Hungary and Ukraine, or even between Flemish and Walloon communities in Belgium. Despite some developments, the national possession of territory – a tangible, physical and durable asset – delimited by borders consolidated by victories, still defines identity and national interests that are often incompatible on the two sides of the border. Mirwaldt (2010) employs social psychological contact theory to uncover factors influencing citizens’ relations across borders. Using as an empirical example the Czech-German CBC (Saxon and Bavarian regions) – both characterized by high levels of interaction – the author demonstrates that Saxons have a more favourable attitude towards Czechs than average Germans, whilst Bavarian attitudes are less favourable than elsewhere in Germany.

Aspects of cross-border cooperation – knowledge transfer

A number of papers focus on learning and innovation transfer through CBC, e.g. Weidenfeld (2013) examines the role of cross-border tourism in innovation and knowledge transfer. Valkering et al. (2013) use the example of the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods (SUN) INTERREG project in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion to identify the main factors supporting cross-border *learning networks*. Van den Broek and Smulders (2015) discuss innovation transfer through CBC from an institutional perspective. Whilst institutions are expected to provide stability, the existence of national borders embed actors on both sides of the frontier in a *multi-level institutional architecture* designed to deal with possible institutional gaps. However, institutional arrangements and policy tools can promote networking activities to intensify cross-border cooperation in cases of an existing potential mismatch between potential partners (Van den Broek et al., 2018). Raposo et al. (2014) employ data of 61 Spanish – Portuguese CBC small and medium enterprises to assess the impact of local and cross-border cooperation on innovation and performance. They found that cooperation has positive impacts on company innovation rates, and ‘the final cross-border firm model demonstrates a strong predictive capacity of the overall performance of small and medium sized companies engaged in such cooperation’ (Raposo et al., 2014). There is growing interest in environmental-related knowledge transfer oriented cross-border cooperation facilitating environmental cohesion (Varjú, 2016), although the limited number of partners and the spatial density of linkages can render the extension of environmental networks difficult.

Aspects of cross-border cooperation – networking

Church and Reid (1996) focus on the involvement of local urban and regional authorities in international networking and the competition between local and national politics, illustrated by CBC. The paper discusses in detail the *political economy* of cooperation (political and institutional theory) using as an example 3 UK-French sea border cooperation networks emerging from small-scale cooperative forms such as town twinning and relying on the economic effects of the Channel Tunnel – yet EU support appears to be the main force driving the operationalization and extension of these cooperating networks. Svensson (2015) employs *social capital theory* that originates from a combination of *social network analysis* (SNA) and qualitative analysis to assess the quality of local government contact networks in CBC. Using the metrics from SNA and some newly developed ones, the paper uses *communication data* of local actors to reveal the social networks along the two sides of the border. The results are somewhat disappointing from an integration point of view. Accordingly, even the well-functioning Euroregions are far from true political integration. By further analyzing contact networks, the study demonstrates a correlation between the number of contacts between local municipalities on both sides of the border, and the nature (quality) of CBC networks. Weak ties however may be considered an *opportunity*, as discussed by González-Gómez and Gualda (2014), in a paper that also applies SNA to analyze the nature of contact networks of professionals working in CBC and the consequences on the institutional CBC. They analyze two qualitatively different border regions, Andalusia, Algarve and Alentejo (AAA) and South Finland - Estonia (SFE). The main difference between border relations is that in AAA border relations were less frequent, and where they existed, they were work-related, whilst in SFE professionals had border ties ‘based both on personal or informal reasons like family or friendships, and on more formal reasons that emerged from work relations’.

Aspects of Cross-Border Cooperation – agriculture and forestry

There is a surprising scarcity of literature with respect to CBC in agriculture and forestry, indicating a *research gap* in this area. Van Den Broek and Smulders (2013) analyse the cross-border innovation system using the case-study of the Venlo (Netherlands) and Niederrhein (Germany) regions where CBC in agriculture (more precisely horticulture) is predominant. The co-operation is based on the ‘Greenport’ status of Venlo, on the Dutch side, with an advantage in horticulture and food industry, and Kreisen, on the German side, where – unlike the Niederrhein Bundesland’s automotive industry-based economy – the horticulture sector is among the most significant ones. Thus, the focus is on the analysis of innovation systems in

agriculture and horticulture from an innovation and educational point of view, by identifying institutional gaps, the reason for their existence, and the role of agency. The main conclusion is ‘that *polity* and *policy* still play an important role and that actors engaging in cross-border cooperation often make use of the European level to overcome the problems related to its respective institutional gaps’ (Van Den Broek & Smulders, 2013). Cross-border cooperation in animal health control is discussed by Hop et al. (2014), illustrated by the Dutch-German border region as an empirical example. The point of departure is the growing specialization in agricultural production (e.g. the increased role of Dutch piglet production that is exported to fattening farms in Germany) and the intensification of cross-border trade. However, this process results in increased risk of cross-border infectious animal disease transfer, which, in turn, requires effective cross-border cooperation between countries’ public administration (e.g. veterinary services). The authors present a comprehensive long-term cross-border cooperation framework to reduce the financial and economic consequences of possible outbreaks, whilst not disturbing trade relationships. Stojanović and Manić (2009) analyse the possibilities for Serbia to use cross-border cooperation to enhance rural development through agritourism. According to their conclusion: ‘differences that exist with respect to ethnic and national characteristics can be used in cross-border areas, the Old Mountain between Bulgaria and Serbia and the Upper Danube region between Serbia, Croatia and Hungary’ (Stojanović & Manić, 2009). An example not strictly of cross-border cooperation, but rather a CBC-fuelled (and supported by the IPA Cross-border Cooperation Program) research in the context of the Serbian-Hungarian border region, is provided by Fiala et al. (2014) analysing drought severity and its effect on agricultural production in the border zone.

Contó et al. (2013) present the I.S.C.I. INTERREG financed project where cooperation is aimed to establish technology-innovation incubators in the Apulia (Italy) and Corfu (Greece) regions that will form a network to support the internationalization of agro-food SMEs in the regions – and attempts to map the characteristic and predominant internationalization patterns of local agro-food small companies. The paper takes a first step in this direction by running a survey, then analyzing the data with respect to 5,331 agro-food enterprises located in the Apulia region. The research of Contó et al. (2014) focuses on possibilities of cooperation and the strategies of regional wine industry (a very competitive sector) players. Accordingly, traditional marketing strategies are not sufficient (Knickel, 2021), emphasis should rather be placed on encouraging consumers to ‘live’ the ethnic, national, cultural, gastronomic, environmental, historical etc. aspects of wine production through wine routes, wine events.

Research topics in CBC related to agriculture include environmental issues, land-use management and tourism. Since border regions are often neglected by central governments and are thus underdeveloped, they have often managed to better preserve the traditional landscape and cultural resources and assets valued by tourism. Cross-border tourism has been greatly promoted both by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. As examples, the Council has initiated the European Cultural Routes program already in 1987 (The Viking Routes, Jewish Heritage Routes, Santiago de Compostella Pilgrim Routes) whilst the EU launched, for example, the European City of Culture initiative. Timothy and Saarinen (2013) emphasize the importance of scale with respect to the results of CBC collaborative efforts in tourism. Wieckowski (2013) discusses the ‘eco-frontiers’, i.e. the mountainous borderlands of Central Europe, from a Polish perspective. Trillo-Santamaría and Paül (2016) use the example of the Geres-Xurés transboundary biosphere reserve located on the Portuguese–Spanish border to show (amongst other findings) that the ‘continuing importance of the border in shaping the land-use planning and management in the area’ accounts for the less than desirable functioning of the transboundary protected area. From a similar perspective, Spyra (2014) analyzes land-use strategies in three Czech-Polish euroregions in Upper Silesia, conducting interviews with management representatives.

Another aspects of CBC that relate to agriculture are the cross-border or rather transnational agricultural cooperatives (Bijman et al., 2012). A transnational cooperative may emerge in four different ways (Nilsson & Madsen, 2007). The first and most typical is when a national cooperative recruits members in a neighbouring country, the second is through acquisitions whereby a cooperative purchases a firm in a different country and ‘invites foreign suppliers to become members’ – as observed in the case of the Dutch Campina dairy cooperative. The third possibility is to form a new cooperative society based on transnational membership, and fourth, cross-border mergers of existing national cooperatives. Nilsson and Ollila’s (2009) focuses on the latter case, and concludes that the heterogenous institutional structures and legal frameworks render the merger process difficult. This is particularly true of the top management acts as the driving force behind the merger, usually having weak connections to the members. Without quoting actual project examples, Winkel et al. (2013) mention the priorities of the forest sector with respect to participation in CBC supported by INTERREG. These are ‘promotion of sustainable forest management, efficiency in private forestry and the use of wood and wood-based products as renewable resources’. Stevanov et al. (2013) describe and analyze the consultation process on forest biomass and sustainable forest management with actors in a CBC context, between Serbia and Croatia.

Classification and drivers of cross-border cooperation

According to Lundquist and Tripple (2013), at least three criteria may be used to classify CBCs. First, the ‘*geographical scope*’, i.e. the size of cooperation (euroregions vs. working communities or transnational co-operations). Second, and most importantly, the ‘*cooperation intensity*’, i.e. the strategic capacity and autonomy of the governing organization. And finally, the *function of actors* involved, i.e. whether local or regional entities are predominant. Terlouw (2012) discusses some contradictions between *individual* cross-border behavior (introducing the term ‘border surfers’) and *territorial* cross-border governance, and questions the hypothesis that cross-border governance is necessary for improved cross-border relations. The study shows that ‘unintended consequences of EU planning practice of stimulating cross-border cooperation sometimes hinder the emergence of cross-border governance’ (Terlouw, 2012).

According to Perkmann (2007a), two different drivers of CBC can be identified. First, *market-driven integration* which is based on increasing social economic relationships or reactivation of historically existing relationships (good examples of market-driven cooperation can be found where significant cross-border differences prevail that can be economically exploited, such as in the case of labor costs, as demonstrated by the German-Polish CBCs). Second, *policy-driven integration* which is based on building cooperative partnerships between public and other bodies, sharing common (local) interests. Most EU CBCs are driven by the latter, focusing on building ‘*meso-level*’ policy institutions.

The literature identifies factors underlying the effectiveness of cooperation. As an example, Sarmiento-Mirwaldt and Roman-Kamphaus (2013) found five such factors:

- Regional and local self-government - stronger rather than weak local governments are more likely to set up successful territorial cooperation;
- Legal background – or sometimes the lack of legal basis, since CBCs stand on vaguely defined bases from this point of view;
- Socio-economic factors – including welfare and development gaps along the border, or weakly developed infrastructure;
- Funding – insufficient funds, since there are no ‘*genuinely common budgets*’, thus, spending decisions are cumbersome, whilst EU funds necessitate heavy administration;
- Culture – regional versus national identity, widespread language skills and, importantly, similar administrative culture.

Perkmann (2003) concludes that ‘CBC is more likely to be effective in countries with a strong tradition of communal autonomy’ whilst they are less functional in ‘politically charged

situations' that characterize, for example, South Tyrol – Land Tirol – Trentino, or in more general, the New Member States.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND IMPACT ANALYSIS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

A major issue of evaluation from the practitioners' point of view is the lack of *comparable methods* to assess the impact of CBCs, more precisely, the impact of Interreg funds on the objectives of CBC. Based on the literature review, papers attempting to go beyond generalities when discussing the results of programs use (deep or semi-structured) interviews targeting mostly public administration employees responsible for cooperation (see Kézai et al., 2022). Few papers conduct interviews among the border population with respect to their attitude regarding the programs (e.g. Decoville and Durand, 2019). Another way to assess the functioning of CBC is to monitor the (number) of still active projects after the termination of community funding.³ However, none of these approaches are actually capable of determining whether the funds were well spent, given the complexity of planned impacts and the difficulties to quantify intangibles (open-mindedness, cultural, behavioral attitude changes among the border population). Despite the existence of quantitative assessment methods (Khmeleva, 2022;) the problem evaluators are facing is the *lack of secondary data* ready for analysis. In all cases where CBC is to be evaluated, the lion's share of the work is collecting relevant data from many sources (e.g. firms, individuals) and compiling them into datasets. However, EU level mandatory impact assessments procedures are available, such as the Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment, Environmental Impact Assessment and the Impact Assessment, where the first two target the environmental dimension of rural development, while the latter evaluates the economic and social impacts of public funds. Recognizing this need, Medeiros (2015) proposes to evaluate some of the more important goals of CBC, namely barrier effect removal and territorial capital valorization, using a *Territorial Impact Assessment* (TARGET_TIA) approach. Eibler et al. (2014) analyze the strengths and weaknesses of CBC through the example of Groenmetropol region (formerly the cradle of European industrial development) with German, Dutch and Belgian stakeholders that developed from the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion. As its name suggests, its main aim is to remove the scars of industrialization after the exhaustion of the natural resources of the

³ Which, in most cases at least when CEE regions are considered, results in a rather discouraging picture. Of the 30 CBC projects that involved Hungarian partners, almost all terminated immediately after the funding ended – see 'winning and dining' critique in the text.

region, by pushing for a more touristic (green) and economic future. Ciok and Raczyk (2008) undertake the assessment of the impact of Interreg IIIA at the Polish-German border, whilst Deppisch (2008) seeks to explain the factors influencing governance in cross-border microregions whether these emerge only as a response to Interreg. The conclusions are somewhat disappointing since it appears that population centers do not attract CBC, whilst Interreg rather than ‘common urgent problems’ are the drivers of cooperation. The final conclusion is that ‘it is questionable whether the Euregio ‘Via Salina’ contributes to the original aims of Interreg IIIA at all’ (Deppisch, 2008). Generalizations on a European scale are illusory when one considers the multitude of individual cases set in very different historic, geographic and institutional backgrounds – to name just a few. Harguindéguy and Bray (2009) assess the impact of CBC through Interreg programs from the aspect of whether these programs empower regional institutions or not. Based on a review of institution-building and institutional entrepreneurship literature, they look into whether Interreg indeed shifted from ‘a policy *for* the regions to a policy *by* the regions’ – as expected by the Commission. Using French and Spanish Interreg examples, they reveal large differences in the level of transition from a state-centric scheme to regionalism, explained by a number of factors, most notably, the pre-existing level and commitment of regional institutions. The authors conclude that Interreg facilitated the empowerment of regional institutions only in cases where a previous decentralization policy was conducted at domestic level, and where pre-existing programs created a consistent and competent regional leadership.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN NEW MEMBER STATES

The literature highlights the very different way CBC functions in New Member States (NMSs), with differences partly explained by the more turbulent historical and institutional evolutionary path. This region was the cradle of nationalism leading to world wars, the fall of empires and the emergence of nation-states with substantial minorities. The borders here were re-designed several times in the past 100 years, moreover, the bulk of the twentieth century was spent behind the iron curtain. The paranoid philosophy of communism definitely ruled out any western type CBC until 1989. *Border loosening* but by no means opening, first occurred between Hungary and Austria’s Burgenland province to facilitate the travel of locals across the border, followed by the establishment of the Alps-Adria Working Community in 1978, that incorporated parts of Austria, Germany, Italy and Yugoslavia (Turnock, 2002). The tri-lateral Czechoslovakian-Polish-German cross-border cooperation ‘Neisse-Nisa-Nysa’ was

founded in 1991 at the beginning of the transition period in Central and Eastern Europe. The next episode in cross-border cooperation occurred during the transition period, and in 1994, CEE countries bordering EU member states could opt for the CBC component of the Phare Programme. Turnock provides a more detailed account of this process in his works (e.g. Turnock, 2002). With the accession of the NMSs in 2004 and 2007, the length of the EU's internal borders almost doubled (Knippschild, 2011). Generally speaking, papers have found that effective cooperation in CEECs is usually more difficult to achieve (Sarmiento-Mirwaldt & Roman-Kamphaus, 2013), due to historical mistrust (Versailles and Trianon peace treaties closing the First World War and the post-Second World War-forced population exchanges/deportations), and the absence of regional traditions (more like regraded regionalism in the form of territorial separation – e.g. Slovakia under the Mečiar government). In addition, local or regional governments are/were powerless entities. One of the earliest papers focusing on CBCs in the Central and Eastern European space is by Turnock (2002) reviewing the trend of opening the formerly impermeable CEEC borders, and the role Interreg plays in this process (Böhm, 2021). Since regional policy in the region was weak or non-existent, CBC contributed ‘significantly to the cohesion and it is also a good indicator of stability in the region’. Further, the paper concludes that the impact of cooperation is more pronounced in the northern part of CEEC than in the Balkan region, with implications upon accession rounds.

Table 1 Incentives for local cross-border cooperation in Central Europe

<i>Incentives for local cross-border cooperation</i>	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Normative</i>
Local	Need to overcome economic decline Common environmental problems Pooling local resources	Will to participate in European integration ('return to Europe') Presence of historical socio-cultural and economic ties Distinct regional identity Common ethnic background
External (national or transnational)	Availability of transnational funds (PHARE CBC, INTERREG) Availability of national financial support Established legal framework (ratified Madrid Convention; bilateral treaties)	Advocacy work of transnational organizations (AEBR, Committee of Regions, European Commission) Learning from best practices or models of other cross-border initiatives Supportive policy of the central government

Source: Medve-Bálint (2013), Table 7.1, pp. 151.

Medve-Bálint (2013) summarizes the incentives (Tab. 1) and obstacles (Tab. 2) of local cross-border cooperation in the case of CEECs (Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia) formerly separated by ‘hard borders’. The paper uses NUTS3-level data of borderland local government participation rate and Interreg IIIA funds available per administrative unit, and finds a statistically significant correlation (albeit with large variance) between the share of local governments participating in CBC and Interreg funds available per local government.

Table 2 Obstacles for local cross-border cooperation in Central Europe

<i>Obstacles to local cross-border cooperation</i>	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Normative</i>
Local	Fierce competition for resources Lack of sufficient own funds Lack of know-how and management skills Language barriers	Historical tensions, conflicts (border as symbol of identity and distinction) Existing stereotypes and prejudice towards the population across the border Fear of competition (labour market, property market) posed by the other side
External (national or transnational)	Lack of established legal framework for cross-border cooperation Inappropriate external financial resources Incompatible political-administrative structures Lack of supportive bilateral governmental agreements	Unsupportive policies of the central government Intergovernmental conflicts Governmental fear of losing territorial integrity

Source: Medve-Bálint (2013), Table 7.2, pp. 153.

The paper concludes that mainly due to historical reasons, in this part of Europe, a *combination of objective and normative incentives* supported on both local and national level is needed for institutionalized CBC. In the absence of non-financial incentives, not even intensive and persistence external (EU) funding can generate viable CBC. Knippschild (2008) analyzes inter-urban cooperation across the German-Polish-Czech border triangle, and concludes that *differences in administrative systems* hamper cooperation. Husák (2010) analyzes the *typology* of CBC projects from two perspectives, the number of successful projects and their financial allocation in the 2004-2006 programing period and the first two and a half years of the 2007-2013 programming period in the South Bohemia region. Project types were classified as cultural-social and other types (that include infrastructure, environment, tourism, education), whilst applicants were categorized as local administration, regional administration, NGOs, universities and research institutions. In both periods, the share of supported cultural-social projects is above 50%, but when the financial allocation is

considered, infrastructural projects are leading. On the other hand, whilst the vast majority of projects implemented are hosted by local actors, when the share of financial allocation is considered, regional actors are the most successful. Knippschild (2011) finds that after 7 years of EU membership and the removal of physical border barriers through Schengen integration, and despite the top-down political encouragement and availability of funds, the intensity of Czech and Polish CBCs is lagging behind. Thus, in the Polish-Czech-German border region, the lack of competence, experience and knowledge with respect to CBC with the municipalities and regions involved is the main reason for underperformance. The paper concludes that institutional capacity among the cooperating partners is ‘crucial’. In a similar vein, Sarmiento-Mirwaldt and Roman-Kamphaus (2013) attempt to analyse the effect of different (contextual) backgrounds on CBC governance, through the example of two co-operations, set up at the same time, along the Polish-German and Polish-Slovakian borders, using data from the 2000-2006 and 2007-2013 programming periods. The authors argue that in order to analyze CBCs, a simple listing of positive and negative background conditions is not sufficient, the comparison of different programs is crucial. Thus, Poland and Slovakia are culturally, linguistically closer to each other without negative historical memories, and already existing cross-border networks. The situation along the Polish-German border is quite the opposite (Tölle, 2013). When *three dimensions of policy effectiveness* – definition, implementation and innovation – are considered, the paper concludes that the Polish-Slovak CBC was ‘far more successful in terms of policy definition and implementation’, whilst the major policy innovation was conceived in the Polish-German cooperation, nonetheless, the ‘lack of historical cross-border networks and common culture of cooperation’ inspired policy-makers to create new structures. Dimitrov et al. (2003) uses a sample of 291 manufacturing firms (30 closed questions) collected in 2001 to analyse the current status, limits, prospects and policies of CBC on a multilateral level in Albania, Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia. It has to be noted that this region is affected by a friction over minorities and different levels of development. *Barriers* to CBC were collected in seven large groups: infrastructure, conditions of border crossings, trade conditions, financial conditions, lack of supportive assistance, general conditions – such as level of corruption, political variables, inflation, and finally, the language barrier. The conclusions of the paper are that whilst the intensity of cross-border relations of firms located in the area is higher than the national average, the East-West direction is developing faster than intra-East CBC.

CBC SWOT analysis aimed at forecasting scenarios is discussed in great detail by Gasparini and Del Bianco (2011), who elaborated an analytical framework, followed by a

detailed application, based on a large number of variables of *internal and external dimensions* of 22 CBCs in the Balkans and Eastern Danube countries. The most negative dimension of the SWOT is the state of public administrations – ‘there is no decision-making power delegated to local authorities by central governments’, followed by the lack of economic factors facilitating CBC, level of training of personnel, and finally, significant economic and institutional obstacles. The question of what happens after local governments get involved in Euroregions, whether they become *policy entrepreneurs* in the *Perkmann sense*, is assessed through the example of three Euroregion initiatives along the Slovakian-Hungarian border by Medve-Bálint and Svensson (2013). Two significant conclusions emerge. First, the *diversity* of CBCs in terms of their capacity to act as policy entrepreneurs depends on whether their primary focus is on the economic dimension or on common ethnic grounds (Hungarian in this case). Second, with respect to the long-term *stability* of Euroregions, the authors warn ‘that setting too ambitious or too vaguely formulated organizational goals for cross-border initiatives may lead to getting the membership ineffective’.

Pámer (2021) investigated the intensity of cross-border cooperation by using a very simple and transparent indicator relying on five factors: physical proximity, joint activities, organizational compatibility, financial balance and investment orientation. The empirical analysis of the Hungarian-Croatian cross border cooperation shows that thematic concentration does have an added value, e.g. cooperation between the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) has intensified, as SMEs are working together on the development of the same product or service.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of CBC and its pivotal role in European regional policy. While CBC has facilitated significant progress in fostering integration, its effectiveness is often undermined by structural and institutional barriers. This paper highlights the need for policies that move beyond funding-driven cooperation to establish genuinely collaborative frameworks grounded in shared regional objectives.

The first critical insight is the need for policy frameworks that transcend administrative and financial barriers without becoming the primary motivation for cooperation. The observed funding-driven nature of many CBC initiatives points to a misalignment between policy intent and on-ground realities. Policymakers should prioritize mechanisms that incentivize cooperation based on shared regional goals rather than financial imperatives, fostering a genuine commitment to collaborative governance.

Secondly, the study identifies regional heterogeneity – manifested in East-West and North-South divides, as well as differences between Old and New Member States – as a crucial determinant of CBC outcomes. Policies must therefore adopt a tailored approach, recognizing the unique socio-economic, cultural, and institutional contexts of border regions. This implies moving beyond a one-size-fits-all model and incorporating region-specific capacity-building programs, particularly in New Member States where institutional legacies and historical mistrust often hinder effective collaboration.

Another key implication is the role of institutional capacity and local governance. Stronger regional and local governments are more likely to initiate and sustain meaningful CBC initiatives. Policies should thus focus on enhancing local governance structures, providing technical assistance, and fostering cross-border institutional networks. This would not only empower regional actors but also create a more balanced distribution of responsibilities and resources among stakeholders.

Furthermore, the study reveals the underutilized potential of CBC in addressing broader policy challenges such as sustainability, knowledge transfer, and conflict amelioration. Policymakers should integrate CBC into strategic planning for areas like environmental management, innovation, and rural development. For instance, CBC in agriculture and forestry can serve as a platform for promoting sustainable practices and mitigating cross-border risks such as disease outbreaks and climate impacts.

Lastly, the findings highlight the importance of improving the evaluation and impact assessment mechanisms for CBC. The lack of robust, standardized metrics hinders the ability to measure the true effectiveness of these initiatives. The adoption of comprehensive evaluation frameworks, such as Territorial Impact Assessments, would enable a more nuanced understanding of CBC's contributions to regional development.

In conclusion, this study calls for a recalibration of CBC policies that not only address administrative and financial barriers but also leverage the unique strengths and address the specific challenges of border regions. By fostering institutional innovation, enhancing local governance, and integrating CBC into broader policy objectives, the European Union can transform its border regions into thriving hubs of cooperation and development.

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