

## Nordregio News

Issue 1 March 2015

### Cross-border co-operation



PHOTO: LISA HÖRNSTRÖM

ISSN 2001-1725 Source: [www.nordregio.se](http://www.nordregio.se)

## Cross-border co-operation – still an undeveloped potential

In this issue of Nordregio News, we focus on cross-border co-operation and its impact on regional development in Nordic and European border regions. We have studied how cross-border co-operation is structured and managed, and whether its full potential for sustainable growth has been realized. The added value of cross-border co-operation can be defined and measured in various ways, including improvement of cross-border infrastructure and increasing flows of tourists.

The point of departure for this issue of Nordregio News involves the results of a European research project called EUBORDERREGIONS, where cross-border co-operation between EU member state regions and their neighbouring regions has been studied. In the first article, **Added value of cross-border co-operation**, Lisa Hörnström, Anna Berlina and Aslı Tepecik Diş, all from Nordregio, give a general introduction to cross-border co-operation in the EU and in the Nordic region. The co-operation between the Nordic countries is one of the most developed examples of cross-border co-operation and integration between countries and people in Europe. The reasons for this are several. First, we have a long history of peace between our neighbouring countries. We also have a common cultural background and languages that are understandable to each other. Earlier studies have

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shown that cross-border co-operation can be a successful strategy in fighting negative consequences of urbanisation and centralisation, increasing trade and strengthening labour markets as well as improving access to welfare services in peripheral regions.

In the second article, **The Swedish-Norwegian cross-border region**, Bjørge Schwenke Fors, a researcher at the Barents Institute in Kirkenes in the very northern part of Norway, introduces us to the Kiruna–Narvik region, a good example of this. In the border region there is far-reaching co-operation between the mining companies on the Swedish side and the deep sea port in Norway. Common efforts to increase tourism in the region are also under way. Clearly, the opportunities are many, especially in border regions like this that have relative parity regarding economy and development in general. The Kiruna–Narvik region stands out in the EUBORDERREGIONS project for many reasons. The most unique feature of the region, compared with other regions along EU's external borders, is the fact that this border is completely open. People can travel freely across the border and a visa is not required.

The third article, **On the added value of cross-border co-operation: The view from EUBORDERREGIONS**, is a reflection on the EUBORDERREGIONS project as a whole and is written by James Scott, a Professor of Geography at the Karelian Institute at the University of Eastern Finland. The article highlights some of the findings from the project, including factors impeding cross-border co-operation, such as lack of understanding between local actors and national decision makers as well as the fact that implementation remains patchy. The “research indicates that bordering processes serve as important sources of insight for policy-relevant research on spatial planning and regional development”, according to Scott, but there is still more to do in terms of implementation, development and understanding, in order to fully capitalise on the value added by cross-border co-operation.

Please enjoy reading this issue of Nordregio News!



**Kjell Nilsson**  
Director

and the Editorial Board of Nordregio News

# Added value of cross-border co-operation

*By Lisa Hörnström, Aslı Tepecik Diş and Anna Berlina*

Cross-border co-operation has the objective of reducing the effects of barriers, including administrative, legal and physical barriers, that are found at borders. Local and regional authorities and organizations co-operate across borders to promote regional development by improving infrastructure and public transport, by managing and monitoring common cultural and natural heritage and by reducing border obstacles such as differences in national regulation in order to facilitate mobility across borders.

Transnational co-operation covers a larger geographical area and might often have a wider and a longer-term scope than cross-border co-operation. Both cross-border and transnational co-operation are important instruments to bring 'added value' to regional and local development. In addition, it is an instrument to achieve the overall EU aim of economic and social cohesion across the EU because its aim is to address common problems and exploit unused potential across the borders. Working towards a Territorial Agenda has been one of the core fields of European collaboration. The objectives of the agenda has been to reduce existing disparities, avoid territorial imbalances, make all policies with a regional impact more coherent and improve integration between the regions of the EU. The revised Territorial Agenda (2020) also makes an important contribution to the debate.

Within both Nordic and European co-operation lie a wide range of programmes and co-operation activities across the borders. Some of these activities, such as Nordic cross-border committees, have long-standing traditions; others are a continuation of previous programmes, e.g. European Territorial Co-operation programmes; and some are relatively recent, among which is the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) Strategy. The cross-border co-operation activities and programmes vary in geographic scope, available funding, themes, political grounding and backing. Cross-border co-operation can be viewed as a multilevel approach to regional development, as it involves actors at different levels building co-operation with an overarching goal of contributing to regional development in border regions.

## The evolution of cross-border co-operation

In a European context, the first Euroregions (defined as transnational co-operation structures between two or more neighbouring areas in different European countries) were established in the 1960s but it was



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not until the 1980s that European institutions began to financially support cross-border co-operation. The deepening of the European Integration process opened the way for EU incentives to be provided for better integration in border areas. With the deepening of the European integration process, regional development has become one of the core activities of the EU as it contributes to achieving the overall EU aim of economic and social cohesion across EU regions and reducing regional disparities. In 1990, the Interreg initiative was launched as an instrument to support cross-border and transnational co-operation. Over the past 25 years, Interreg – officially, European Territorial Co-operation (ETC) – has become the key instrument of the EU to support co-operation, exchange and networking between partners across borders. In addition to the ETC programmes, the EU has set up a number of programmes focusing on co-operation along the external borders of Europe: The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) is considered a framework for co-operation between regional and/or local authorities on both sides of the EU external border .

In the Nordic countries, cross-border co-operation between adjacent municipalities and regions has a long tradition, dating back to the 1960s when transnational co-ordination organizations were established to enhance integration among the Nordic regions. There are currently 12 Nordic cross-border committees located throughout the Nordic region, which work towards enhancing growth and development in the cross-border regions. The prerequisites for Nordic cross-border co-operation have changed due to investments in infrastructure (the clearest example being the Öresund Bridge between Sweden and Denmark), changing consumption patterns (border shopping has become an increasingly important source of income for many towns in Sweden located close to the border with Norway) as well as changes in attitudes when it comes to working and living in neighbouring countries. In addition, the introduction of the Interreg programmes in the Nordic countries when Sweden and Finland became members of the EU has had an important impact on cross-border co-operation in the Nordic context.

### **What is the added value of cross-border co-operation?**

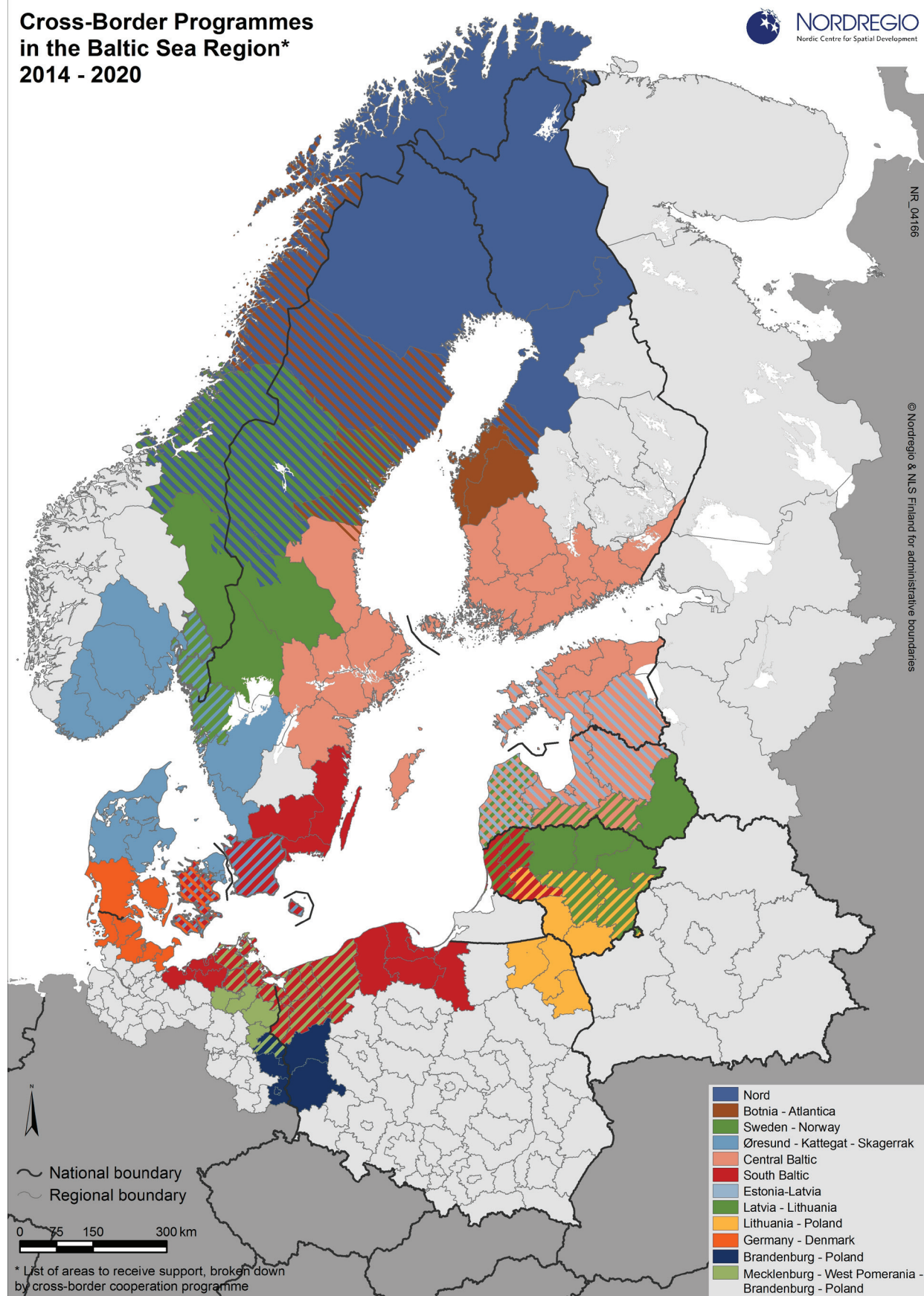
There is an assumption that transnational and cross-border co-operation can bring added value to regional and local development and ultimately enhance European territorial integration. The added value of a policy or a programme involves a discussion of the need for such an intervention, i.e. its rationale and relevance, and its effectiveness in reaching its stated objectives. The concept of added value has been widely discussed in EU cross-border and transnational programmes. Four main types of added value of cross-border and transnational co-operation can be identified: solutions to common problems, learning



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# **Cross-Border Programmes in the Baltic Sea Region\* 2014 - 2020**



**Figure 1: Cross-border programmes in the Baltic Sea Region 2014-2020.**

opportunities, generating critical mass and building structure for further co-operation and territorial cohesion.

Cross-border co-operation can be very hands-on when there is a need to co-operate to solve a problem that is common to a particular area. This can be seen in the co-operation between countries around the Baltic Sea, concretized in the EU BSR Programme under the ETC objective. The BSR programme most specifically supports projects that focus on solutions to shared problems. This is also reflected in the priority area of the Baltic Sea, which is seen as a common resource. The work of the Nordic cross-border committees is also guided by the same principle. For example, some of the committees covering the peripheral areas are addressing issues related to depopulation, unemployment, infrastructure and other challenges that are relevant to a specific border area. A practical example of solving a common problem – a lack of medical personnel and long travel distances – is the co-operation between municipalities when it comes to providing emergency services across the Swedish–Norwegian border but also between Sweden and Finland.

Cross-border co-operation is also recognized as an important platform for exchange of knowledge and opportunities for policy learning across borders. This type of added value is emphasized both in previous and current ETC programmes. One challenge for the ETC programmes is to concretize the learning processes and find tools for measuring and evaluating learning across borders. For instance, opportunities for exchanging expertise between Swedes and Norwegians in the mining and oil and gas industries have been emphasized in the Kiruna–Narvik border area. (Read more about the Kiruna–Narvik case study in the article by Bjørge Schwenke Fors.) Cross-border co-operation can also be a way of generating critical mass, e.g. by agreeing upon common welfare service solutions or creating cross-border clusters of companies and research institutions in order to enhance innovation activities. Furthermore, through the joint management of programmes and projects, cross-border co-operation enhances organizational and policy learning, while contributing to the removal of border obstacles, thereby improving the living conditions for people within a cross-border region.

Moreover, the added value of cross-border co-operation can lie in building structures for further co-operation and ultimately in enhancing cohesion. It can be both the building of institutional capacity across borders and a focus on physical infrastructure. The current ETC programmes building on existing cross-border co-operation are an example of the former; an example of the latter is the Öresund Bridge, which created better conditions for co-operation and exchange in the Sweden–Denmark cross-border region.

In some Nordic country borderlands, as well as in other parts of Europe, strong cross-border structures and close collaboration across borders have been established to solve common problems. The question of what value cross-border and transnational co-operation can add to regional and local development will guide the current (2014 – 2020) ETC programme period.

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***The Territorial Agenda** of the EU is an informal strategic transnational policy paper that refers to territorial cohesion in Europe. The Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020 (TA 2020) is the updated strategy jointly approved by the ministers responsible for Spatial Planning and Territorial Development. It was approved under the Hungarian Presidency on 10 May 2011. The Territorial Agenda highlights the need and potential for a territorial perspective on strategic transnational policy-making. It calls for specific attention to be paid to external EU borders, better policy co-ordination across countries in supporting cross-border and transnational functional regions, and ensuring that European Territorial Co-operation programmes are better embedded within national, regional and local development strategies by promoting the use of local assets for ensuring global competitiveness of the regions.*

***Interreg** (officially European Territorial Co-operation, ETC) is financed under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and is part of the structural and investment policy of the EU. Interreg was introduced as one of the objectives of EU Cohesion Policy in 2000. One of the main targets of the Interreg initiative is to support equal economic, social and cultural development of the whole territory of the EU, by fostering cross-border, transnational and interregional co-operation. The fifth programming period of Interreg started in 2014 and will run until 2020.*

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# The Swedish-Norwegian cross-border region

*By Bjarge Schwenke Fors*

The Swedish–Norwegian region, as defined in the project, spans the northernmost section of the 1630 km long Swedish–Norwegian border. It includes the Swedish towns and municipalities of Gällivare and Kiruna, and the region of Ofoten with the town of Narvik on the Norwegian side of the border (see map 2). The region is sparsely populated, with 70 000 people living within an area of 42 000 square km (the size of Denmark). Rough mountainous terrain separates the Norwegian and Swedish parts of the region from each other. The only cross-border connections are a road (European route E10) and a railway (the Iron Ore Line). Mining is the principal economic activity in the region. Iron ore (90% of the EU's total production) is extracted on the Swedish side and transported across the border to the warm-water, deep-sea port of Narvik, from where it is shipped to the world market.



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## **An exceptional region**

The conditions for CBC in the Swedish–Norwegian region are generally very good. As such, the region stands out as rather exceptional compared with the other cases studied in the EUBORDERREGIONS project.

First, the Swedish–Norwegian border is open, and has been so for a long time. Already in 1959, Norway and Sweden signed a customs co-operation agreement aimed at facilitating border crossing, simplifying customs controls and clearance procedures. Since 2001, both countries have been members of the Schengen Area. In comparison, the other CBRs are divided by hard borders that restrict the flow of people and goods and hamper cross-border integration. Visas are typically required by both sides and the actual crossing of the borders tends to be an arduous and time-consuming procedure.

Second, the Swedish–Norwegian region is marked by economic parity, with the two sides of the border enjoying similar economic prosperity. CBC may therefore take place on an equal basis. The other cases are characterized by a considerable economic disparity between the EU side and the non-EU side of the border. In most of these cases, the GDP per capita is more than three times higher on the EU side. Such asymmetry tends to affect CBC in a negative way.

Third, the external borders of the EU are often deep borders, marked by cultural divisions and nationalistic sentiments. Linguistic differences often pose a practical challenge to cross-border integration. Another obstacle is the existence of antagonistic attitudes due to past conflicts.

Here too, the Swedish–Norwegian case represents an exception. There are no significant cultural barriers between Norwegians and Swedes and no historical grievances hampering CBC. Along the northernmost section of the Swedish–Norwegian border, culture and history even serve to unite the two sides. First, a sizeable ethnic minority, the Sámi, have traditionally lived on both sides of the border. Second, the two sides share a common industrial history and identity. The towns of Kiruna and Narvik owe their very existence to the development of mining and the Iron Ore Line in the late nineteenth century. Rallarkulturen (navvy culture), mining and railway heritage, is displayed and celebrated all over the region.

In most cases, the border between the EU and its neighbouring countries functions as both a bridge and as a barrier. In some ways, the border encourages CBC; in other ways, it obstructs it. However, in the Swedish–Norwegian case, the border is hardly a barrier at all. Respondents in the region refer to the proximity of the border as something solely positive. Negative factors related to border proximity elsewhere, such as crime, illegal migration, non-equal relations and unfair competition, are barely mentioned. CBC in itself tends to be valued as something entirely positive, progressive and productive.

### **Viable fields for cross-border co-operation**

Industry is a key field for economic CBC in the region. The cross-border network formed by the extraction, transport and export of iron ore constitutes an economically symbiotic relationship between the two sides of the border. The Swedish mines depend on the Norwegian port and vice versa. Industrial CBC involves the large Swedish state-owned mining company LKAB as well as numerous other smaller actors on both sides of the border. The industrial CBC is largely unproblematic and self-propelled. There is, however, a need for an improved cross-border infrastructure as the demand for minerals is expected to increase in the coming years. The duplication of the railway between Kiruna and Narvik has been proposed as one way to increase cross-border transport capacity.

Much CBC within the region takes place within the framework of shared Sámi culture and heritage. The co-operation between the municipalities of Tysfjord (Norway) and Gällivare (Sweden) is one example. Since 1999, the two municipalities, together with local Sámi communities and organizations, have joined forces in several Interreg projects aimed at strengthening cross-border integration. One of the outcomes of these projects has been the establishment of the Border Trail (Sámi: Rádjebálges, Swedish: Gränsleden, Norwegian: Grenseleden), a cross-border heritage trail that offers locals and visitors an insight into the rich culture and nature of the region.

Unique for the Swedish–Norwegian region is the constructive role played by the municipal business development companies in regional CBC. The development companies of Futurum (Narvik), Progressum (Kiruna) and Expandum (Gällivare) have collaborated across borders



**Figure 1.** The cross-border region of Kiruna-Narvik.

for a number of years, often together with other public and private partners. The companies have defined CBC as an important dimension of regional development. Three years ago, they jointly established the East West Arena, an annual conference that has become the main platform for discussing CBC-related issues and developing CBC links in the region.

### The potential for further development

While industry will remain the most important field for economic CBC in the region, there is also great potential for developing CBC within other sectors. Tourism is habitually referred to in this context. Both sides of the border attract a considerable number of tourists but are largely independent of each other. Norwegian as well as Swedish respondents therefore point to the possibility of creating cross-border tourist packages. The idea is to capitalize on the great natural variety in the wider cross-border area from the Lofoten Islands to the Bothnian Bay. Co-operation within the field of space research and expertise exchange between the Norwegian petroleum sector and the Swedish mining sector are also mentioned as fruitful fields for future co-operation.

The Swedish–Norwegian CBR, characterized by a high degree of openness, parity and unity, offers unique conditions for CBC. The fur-

ther development of CBC in this region is not so much about breaking down barriers as about exploiting the opportunities that already exist. To improve CBC further in the region, general awareness of these opportunities needs to be raised. There is also a need for more meeting points where organizations from both sides can get together. The establishment of the East West Arena is an important step in the right direction and the recent popularity of the event (180 participants in 2014) demonstrates its importance.

# On the added value of cross-border co-operation: The view from EUBORDERREGIONS

*By James Scott*

Cross-border co-operation (CBC) can be defined as political projects carried out by state, private and third-sector actors with the express goal of extracting benefit from joint initiatives in various economic, social, environmental and political fields. Through new forms of political and economic interaction – both institutional and informal – it has been suggested that greater cost-effectiveness in public investment can be achieved, economic complementarities exploited, the scope for strategic planning widened and environmental problems more directly and effectively addressed. Furthermore, research interest in CBC has been spurred by the momentous political changes of the past two decades.

While the concept of CBC is not new, it is the context of post-Cold War change that has elevated CBC to the paradigmatic status it now enjoys. 'De-bordering' within the enlarged European Union and new cross-border relations in Central and Eastern Europe indicate that not only states but citizens, communities and regions have chosen to open new avenues of communication with their neighbours across national boundaries. Furthermore, in those contexts where states have (re)gained their independence and new borders have emerged, Euroregions, cross-border city partnerships and similar co-operation vehicles have also come into being. CBC within the EU and at the EU's external borders aim at managing issues that transcend the confines of individual communities, issues such as social affairs, economic development, minority rights, cross-border employment and trade, and the environment. CBC also involves attempts to exploit borderland situations, using borders as a resource for economic and cultural exchange as well as for building political coalitions for regional development purposes.

If the practice of CBC has been a long-standing element of the EU's border politics as a means of consolidating political community, it has been employed vis-à-vis neighbouring states in order to enhance the EU's external role as both a stabilizing and a transformative force in post-Soviet and Mediterranean regional contexts. Announced with much fanfare in 2003, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) promised a new dimension in regional co-operation and interstate relations between the EU and its direct neighbours to the east and south. The geopolitical vision that underlies the EU's concept of Neighbourhood is that of 'privileged partnership'; that is, of a special, multifaceted and mutually beneficial relationship with the EU. A further in-



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dication of this are the roles attributed to civil society and CBC. In particular, the strengthening of a 'civil society dimension' within the Neighbourhood context has been promulgated by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. Some evidence for the redoubled efforts of the EU to promote co-operation with its immediate neighbours is provided by ENPI.

The project EUBORDERREGIONS has shed critical light on how related CBC at the EU's external borders functions in practice. Our research confirms that the EU has attempted to create new contexts for social development, economic growth and innovation. In addition, CBC has been framed as a region-building process across borders. The EU's political uses of borders, moreover, have been highly idealistic, despite the complex practical agenda of Cohesion and Neighbourhood policies within which co-operation discourses are embedded. A central logic of Interreg and other support mechanisms of CBC has been the creation of new communities of interest and geographically flexible networks, and to break down territorial/administrative constraints to the exchange of ideas. It is perhaps not an exaggeration that the EU has envisaged a project of European construction through the transcendence of local particularisms and boundaries. However, this idealistic element of the EU's border politics coexists uncomfortably with the Realpolitik of implementation. CBC within the EU is embedded in Cohesion Policy and is highly territorialised: spatially defined indicators, goals, remits and responsibilities create their own barriers to interaction. At the same time, national implementation of Cohesion Policy remains guided by a fixation on physical investment and development and not on the development of co-operative networks across borders. As a result, different border logics inform the EU's politics of borders.

Based on fieldwork and interaction with stakeholders our research raises a number of issues of particular policy relevance.

■ Understanding the border as a resource. It is clear that national contexts and the gaps between them still very much influence policy-oriented behaviours at the national and subnational levels. Despite three decades of support, CBC is by no means a self-evident resource for territorial development; it is also not a process that can be understood as inherently 'rational', based on common-sense economic, social and/or cultural logics. The informal economy appears to understand the border quite well, but formal governance structures oftentimes do not, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe and in neighbouring countries. One reason for this is the lack of incentives and (still) high transaction costs that are associated with CBC. As a result of this situation, we have observed in EUBORDERREGIONS that stakeholders generally affirm the desirability of CBC but that actual implementation remains patchy.

■ Critically interpreting CBC as filling gaps in Cohesion and Neighbourhood Policies. Our research reflects tensions between realist regional policy concerns related to national development and more idealistic policy imperatives that seek to create alternative, border-transcending territorial contexts for regional policy. Cohesion policies and ENP are nationally oriented and highly territorial. Furthermore, funding and policy marginality affects CBC at the external borders – where we also find the poorest border regions – to a much greater degree; here, co-operation networks are highly localized and not well developed. Generally, some parts of ‘core Europe’ do much better in this respect. Sustainability and a high degree of self-referentiality have been achieved, for example, in the Dutch–German case even if funding is low.

■ Highlighting the dilemma of ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ development factors. The one-sided focus on ‘hard’ factors and physical investment is problematic. Regional policy tends to be positivistic, based on an ‘objective’ and containerized picture of territorial conditions, assets and structural relationships. CBC, on the other hand, is highly networked, often ‘de-territorialized’ in the sense that interaction between different actors is the main driving force.

■ Emphasizing the role of civil society actors. Civil society needs to be a more important part of the ENP–Cohesion–CBC nexus. This is a rather long-term concern and reflects the problem that, despite rhetorical assurances to the contrary, actors that represent societal and community issues have very limited opportunities to access CBC promotion structures.

■ The gaps between local-level needs and interests and the high-level (geo)politics that governs the management of borders. Rarely do border communities have the political and economic influence to negotiate special border regime conditions with central government agencies. However, a degree of local control can be achieved through local networks that create bridges across hard borders. Furthermore, and in the long term, local-level and people-to-people co-operation can play an important role in supporting the high politics of interstate dialogue.

■ Drawing attention to the need for new forms of data collection for policy purposes. Much of the basis for developing regional policies is provided by quantitative and criteria-based methodological approaches. The assumption underlying these traditional approaches is that regions are ‘given’ and exist objectively as spatial categories. While necessary for general policy purposes, these are broad-brush methods that ignore the social, immaterial, non-quantifiable and networked na-

ture of territorial relations. There are methodological issues to consider. Many socio-spatial phenomena can only be described, explained or traced; they cannot be meaningfully measured, counted or 'correlated' in a positivistic manner. Studies with a 'soft' approach focusing on perceptions and representations also have the benefit that they critically challenge the researcher's own preconceptions. Our research indicates that bordering processes serve as important sources of insight for policy-relevant research on spatial planning and regional development. This is clearly most relevant in relating the significance of CBC and other flexible territorial arrangements to European Cohesion Policy.

Finally, what might be the future of CBC as a project of de-bordering? At the level of EU Cohesion Policy, the direct coupling of CBC with regional development goals appears to be shifting towards more territorially flexible arrangements and a focus on place-based strategies and 'integrated territorial investments' that can be potentially implemented in cross-border and transnational contexts. Nevertheless, the overall resources available for genuinely border-transcending regional development are but a small fraction of the overall EU structural funds budget that is targeted largely at newer and poorer member states. As has been suggested above, CBC needs to be understood as more than just filling the gaps between national development strategies; it is a cultural context for cohesion beyond traditional nation-centric modes. Furthermore, cross-border integration need not be all-encompassing but centred on specific networks that create trust and sustainable working relationships. If the role of CBC as an element of European Territorial Cohesion is to be taken seriously, the policy aim should be less focused on fulfilling 'objective' quantifiable targets and more on the capacities of CBC to develop according to its own dynamics. This includes more support for civil society actors and their networks; together with other local-level actors, these groups can in effect create regional geographies above and beyond traditional state-centred administrative territoriality.

*For more information regarding the EUBORDERREGIONS project please visit the official website: [www.euborderregions.eu](http://www.euborderregions.eu)*

*For further reading:*

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