



EDITORIAL: NEW CHALLENGES FOR EUROPEAN CROSS-BORDER AND TRANSBOUNDARY COOPERATION

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Abstract. While a gradual increase in the permeability of the boundaries present in Europe was long seen as a linear process irreversible in nature, that situation in fact started to change around 2015. The process that then ensued reflected crises associated with influxes of refugees, the geopolitical situation in Ukraine, and then, from 2020 onwards, the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes might further be set against the two facts that there are, on the one hand, numerous locations in which cross-border or transboundary functional connections have become so strong that mechanisms hitherto acting in support of their development simply fail to suffice; as well as, on the other hand, many near-border areas that remain entirely peripheral. Pandemic circumstances made plain the inadequate level of institutional support extended to the development and functioning of transboundary functional areas, including as regards their labour markets. And so to the articles brought together in the present edition of 'Europa XXI', which seek to address the above issues and derived research questions. They do this by way of both general reflection and the concrete results of research carried out on the situations in border areas, as well as the conditioning, level and structure of border traffic. Taken together, the texts presented here incline the reader to conclude that EU support for cross-border or transboundary cooperation needs redefining even in the present, and all the more so as we arrive at further programming periods. The support in question ought to be coordinated more effectively with Cohesion Policy as a whole, while also taking the global geopolitical context into account. It should also address matters of cross-border or transboundary public services, resilience in the face of crisis, and the natural heritage present in or constituted by border zones.

Keywords: border, cross-border and transboundary co-operation, EU Cohesion Policy, Interreg.

International connections and cross-border or transboundary cooperation have been and continue as key pillars of European integration. Indeed, in the region of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) the successful process of mass accessions to the European Union (EU) was necessarily preceded by a number of initiatives associated with cooperation of the above profile. Post-2007, a further major step was taken with the arrival of freedom to cross borders within the Schengen Area, and the widespread perception of this as an obvious good.

Perhaps contrary to popular belief, the external borders of the Union were also subject to efforts to facilitate crossings, with relevant agreements relating to small-scale, local border traffic on the one hand, but also visa-free movement among people between particularly specified states.

This gradual increase in permeability of boundaries in Europe (be they borders within the EU or even external borders) was deemed a change of a linear and irreversible nature, until that circumstance in fact started to modify around 2015. The successive reasons included the crisis associated with influxes of refugees, the geopolitical crisis afflicting Ukraine, and then (from 2020) the unprecedented situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Against that background, sporadic inspections were reintroduced at Schengen borders, and certain agreements on local border traffic were suspended or annulled (as in the case of the one pertaining between Poland and Russia), while 2020 brought temporary cessation of cross-border traffic between the majority of European countries.

The pandemic situation thus revealed the insufficient nature of institutional support extended to the development and functioning of transboundary functional areas, including relevant markets for labour and public services. Areas of this kind were actually in place and functioning, but in conditions of endemic threat, restrictions were reintroduced into them, on the basis of political boundaries rather than the real-life zones of daily mobility characterising given local communities.

Irrespective of the new external conditions, studies from the domain of spatial planning and territorial governance demonstrate the existence of many locations in which the functional cross-border or transboundary connections are so strong that mechanisms applied to date in support of development no longer prove sufficient.

Equally, many border areas remain peripheral, to the extent that expectations regarding external assistance are rather concerned with the stimulation of development, as opposed to any development of relations with partner countries. Discussion on this therefore looks especially timely as a new EU financial perspective has been developed, with architecture of Cohesion Policy modified, and a potential for an inflow of new means in association with the Recovery Fund.

Against that background it has been important to consider the dynamics and future of cross-border functional ties pertaining in the EU and its vicinity. Likewise, it would appear to be very important for new territorial mechanisms of public intervention to be elaborated, as adapted to the new situation in which border areas find themselves. Furthermore, the aforementioned interruption to the otherwise steady increase in the permeability of European borders forces reflection and rethink as regards the EU's external border at least, given the ongoing geopolitical tensions exemplified along Poland's eastern border, as well as on Cyprus and in other localities around the Mediterranean.

The articles assembled together in this volume of 'Europa XXI' seek to address and respond to the subject matter, problems and research questions indicated above. They offer both generalised reflections and detailed research results in relation to border areas, as well as the conditioning, levels and structures that characterise border traffic. Any reading of these texts will encourage an awareness that the development of border areas, and cross-border cooperation, are elements to a broader spatial policy gaining implementation by the EU and its Member States. That policy has been the subject of a steadily-evolving paradigm, as can be seen *inter alia* in the provisions of the EU's 'Territorial Agenda 2030'. We are alerted to the significance of these changes by Jakubowski and Miszczuk (2021). The new Agenda is believed by the authors to pay more attention to borderlands in general and the actual lines followed by borders in particular. To a greater extent than before, the documents of this rank recognise the importance of local resources and endogenous bases underpinning the development of border zones.

The above serves to confirm a thesis also present in earlier studies, that a border and a borderland locality have the potential to serve as an asset, and do not merely point to the problematic existence of some areas of peripheral character (Kolosov & Więckowski, 2018).

However, in the view of Jakubowski and Miszczuk, Agenda fails to promote new and innovative solutions and support instruments referring more appropriately to this kind of concept for borderlands. Solutions based around provisions in Agenda also lead the authors to identify a need for support for cross-border cooperation to be better-integrated with the overall aims of Cohesion Policy. They also touch upon the need for support to concentrate more in areas characterised by the most intensive cooperation. In densely-populated areas with a longer tradition of cross-border relations (as in the German borderlands), a key challenge in this context is to assure access to public services, as well as cooperation as they are delivered.

The author of a further text (Dühr, 2021) note how – in this case – barriers to the pursuit of joint undertakings are presented by legal limitations at national level, as well as political conditioning locally. They at the same time stress how projects within the Interreg framework cannot resolve problems of the above nature. This leads the researchers to opine that new European-level regulations are needed for cross-border cooperation over access to services. For the author feels it justified to regard cross-border access to services as referring directly to what lies at the heart of the entire European integration idea. The problem with access to services makes itself especially felt within the functional areas (cf. Pamer, 2018) – in which the scale of certain problems (e.g. as regards public transport) exceed the possibilities Interreg Programmes provide for.

Other authors also note how means assigned under Interreg do not suffice to overcome negative marginalising tendencies present in low-population border areas, and first and foremost near the external border of the EU (Nagy, Ricz & Fekete, 2021). Certain projects have furthermore been the butt of strong criticism, including over beneficiaries' institutional possibilities. In this context, what emerges as a major problem at the level of territorial management relates the latter with the distribution of development projects and programmes. However, as Maruniak and Lisovkyi (2021) note, along the external border of the EU assistance plays a rather different role. A key issue there is ensuring states' territorial integrity, as well as creating new 'bridgeheads' for European integration. This is made clear by work relating to Ukraine's western border. In such places, support from EU programmes like Interreg paradoxically plays a greater role, even as financial outlays are rather small. This ensures what is first and foremost a symbolic importance, as well as a preparatory one (always holding out the potential for closer cooperation in future). This would seem to have its consequences when it comes to the selection of beneficiaries and particular projects for implementation.

Equally, issues of border cooperation may not conceal the way borders may be places of tension, with this particularly the case where the EU's external borders are concerned. However, in these places too, it can prove useful to have an awareness of the directions being taken by structural assistance, and the instruments these entail. Here and in such cases, the aim would be to ease the tensions referred to, and to work in the name of reconciliation and closer contacts, if only at the level of inhabitants. That would be the theory at least, as in practice EU support for such processes proves impossible, and is simply not forthcoming at local level. A case in point here might be the border ('Green Line') between the two parts of the divided Cyprus. The EU proves unable to even divine exactly what the said 'Line' actually is (Le Mouel, 2021).

The EU's external border of course includes places of the influx and checking of people reaching the EU as tourists, on business, as students, or with the more-or-less regulated status of migrant or refugee. From this point of view, different segments of border are seen to change in significance over time, often quite dynamically, becoming associated more or less than before with the global system of migration. An example is provided by the dynamics to movements of people observed over the longer term along the eastern border of Poland. The authors of an article on this

(Komornicki & Wiśniewski, 2021) note that the size and structure characterising movement across the border that is also the EU's external border is influenced by specific events of a geopolitical nature often occurring far away from the Community. Our capacity to anticipate these is far from adequate, even as this may have an indirect effect on such aspects as the instruments deployed in support of development in border areas, not least infrastructural projects (that face a risk of being rescaled).

This volume of 'Europa XXI' is further enriched by two essays taking a wider look at borders. Biger (2021) draws attention to the varied nature of the borders between nation-states and non-nation states. The ambiguous role of the EU in strengthening or weakening polities' significance is pointed to here. In the second essay, Więckowski (2021) considers the importance of sustainable transport in border areas, stressing the latter's regular status as rather little-modified from an environmental point of view. This of course means a potential for cross-border cooperation to develop at odds with the objective of protecting natural (or even cultural) heritage. Against that background, the author calls for a more-precise defining of sustainable development in the context of transboundary areas and the public interventions in the field of transport that take place there.

Taken together, the articles assembled in this volume of 'Europa XXI' sustain a conclusion that EU support for cross-border and transboundary cooperation needs redefining even in the context of the present programming period, and all the more so in the light of those that are upcoming. What is revealed here is – on the one hand – a need for local cooperation within the framework of small projects pursued by local entities and even groups of inhabitants; as well as – on the other – more money, to put it bluntly, given the evidence from previous work that the areas in which functional transboundary regions are taking shape most clearly lack the level of assistance they would ideally need. Put briefly and bluntly, the functional configurations in question are generating need that goes beyond the possibilities of Interreg – at least in the form it has assumed up to now.

Bearing all this mine, we might list a few directions of possible change to EU-level territorial support and support for cross-border or transboundary cooperation. Most of all, that support ought to be:

- better coordinated with European Cohesion Policy as a whole;
- better suited to already-developed functional linkages, in terms of both scale and structure;
- paying particular heed to the role played by the EU's external border, including as a 'bridgehead' for European integration;
- encompassing services of general public interest, as well as the legal bases upon which these might undergo cross-border or transboundary development;
- taking note of the little-transformed border zones constituting a resource as regards both natural-heritage and climate protection;
- considering the broader geopolitical dimension, including the global context;
- developing mechanisms and structures to guard against the severing of links even where crisis conditions (such as those pertaining during the pandemic) arise.

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