



PREMISES AND BARRIERS ASSOCIATED WITH CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION – EVIDENCE FROM BORDER REGIONS OF POLAND

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Abstract: The aim of the work detailed here has been to identify the most important premises upon which cross-border cooperation can be established, the conditions for its further continuation or lack of continuation; and the key barriers to and benefits from the cooperation in question. Also examined was the intensity of cooperation in the periods before, during and after the implementation of individual cross-border cooperation projects – the aim being to assess the extent to which joint projects generate mutual relations of greater intensity. Analysis drew on a questionnaire survey run among all organisations involved in the implementation of Poland’s EU-funded cross-border cooperation projects in the 2007–2020 period.

Keywords: border areas, cross-border cooperation, stability of cooperation, Poland.

Introduction

In research dedicated to borders and borderlands, the matter of cross-border cooperation proves to be an important issue most often associated with intensifying processes of integration and disintegration to be noted globally. The dynamics here are such that the cooperation alluded to involves European states in particular, and above all those in the EU – for which the topic has been a core issue permanently present in investment policies pursued since the 1990s (Komornicki, 2021).

In that EU context, cross-border cooperation measures have undergone fundamental evolution as a Community Initiative (INTERREG) of relatively limited budget developed into a core objective of EU Cohesion Policy (termed European Territorial Cooperation) by the time of the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 planning periods. This denotes cross-border cooperation having become a key instrument and means of pursuit of EU development policy, which in the process sustains cooperation between the most important types of organisation (both public and private), in relation to matters of very diverse thematic scope and across widely-differing spatial dimensions (Dotzblasz, 2017).

The timing of events was such that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs), including Poland, engaged in cross-border cooperation from the moment they began to accede to the EU (even as certain borders had been characterised by selected forms of cooperation implemented far earlier than that). Although the subsequent programming periods of EU Cohesion

Policy naturally featured cross-border cooperation of somewhat modifying character and scope, the years 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 can be considered to have featured a relative high level of durability as regards the policy's basic underpinnings (Dołzbłasz & Raczyk, 2021; Dühr, 2021; Jakubowski & Miszczuk, 2021).

The subject literature dedicated to various aspects of cross-border cooperation is very rich, with research conducted within many different scientific disciplines. On the one hand, this allows the issue of cooperation to be looked at from many (sometimes very) different points of view. On the other hand, it gives rise to significant difficulties when it comes to any synthesis of research results obtained, due to – for example – different definitional, conceptual and methodological approaches. A consequence is that there still seems to be a shortage of in-depth analyses of cooperation, including in relation to the reasons for cross-border relations to be established, and the assessment of the intensity of those relations as cross-border cooperation projects are implemented. This would be particularly the case for research conducted simultaneously in various borderlands and taking account of areas located on either side of a border.

Were it to be pursued under circumstances of relatively stable formal conditions of cooperation, research of the kind indicated would serve as an important point of reference for assessing whether existing premises will or will not be conducive to such cooperation's stability (or durability). It would also permit determinations as to whether the implementation of cooperation projects is conducive to further intensification of cross-border relations in the periods beyond project time horizons.

It is in recognition of the cognitive gap of the above kind, and with an aim of filling it, that the work described here was carried out. Specifically, the research pursued sought to identify the most important premises underpinning the establishment of cross-border cooperation, as well as likely conditions associated with further continuation or lack of continuation, and the most important barriers to cooperation, plus the benefits it is capable of generating. The work also examined the intensity of cooperation before, during and after the implementation of individual cross-border cooperation projects, with a view to assessing the extent to which such joint projects serve to intensify mutual relations.

The state of the art

Cross-border cooperation and its specifics

The complexity of cross-border cooperation and the development of borderlands suffices to make this an interesting and extensive field of interdisciplinary research (Newman & Paasi, 1998; Brunet-Jailly, 2005; Jones, 2009; Popescu, 2011; Wassenberg et al., 2015). Indeed, deliberations on borders and borderlands can be found to manifest a number of trends, with time and effort for example devoted to methodology, classifications, and matters of demarcation and delimitation, as well as selected aspects of the actual functioning of borderlands (for example relating to cultural landscapes and social/economic development, or else to a border's influence on borderland development, be that also at times of a limiting nature). In the latter case, various types of economic flow are pointed to as particularly relevant to the formation of stability, prosperity and territorial cohesion (Decoville & Durand, 2016). At the same time, a number of studies emphasise a peculiarity of border areas, which is that even numerous and strong interactions do not necessarily lead to increased convergence or similarity (De Boe et al., 1999; Topaloglou et al., 2005). This is because intensity of exchange does not translate in a simple way into the quality of cross-border relationships (e.g. people-to-

people relations). As a result, the strength of cross-border integration cannot be assessed using single indicators based on these flows (e.g. relating to border permeability or cross-border trade).

It is necessary to remember that work from the field of border studies usually concerns either selected areas (a border between given countries, selected border areas, etc.) or particular subjects (e.g. stability or permeability), with this being particularly the case where areas on either side of a border are considered. Against that background it is possible to note the relatively small number of studies on developmental differences and cross-border linkages in the socio-economic sphere, including network relations.

It is generally agreed that ‘every state border, every border region, is unique’ (Anderson & O’Dowd, 1999, p. 594) – a convenient tenet that nevertheless gains confirmation in certain studies (e.g. Decoville & Durand, 2019; Durand & Decoville, 2020), even as it leaves the literature dominated by case studies that hinder comparison and necessitate great caution whenever and wherever generalisations are attempted. This situation further reflects shortfalls in the adequacy and comparability of data on border areas, methodological problems, the basic difficulty of conducting research that goes beyond a single country, and so on.

After Durand and Decoville (2020), we may regard the implementation of cross-border cooperation projects as an important component to the process of cross-border integration (even as we recall the complexity and multifaceted nature of a process that may manifest itself differently from one borderland to another). Essential components can be deemed to include dimensions that are functional (e.g. involving cross-border practices), ideational (e.g. involving the level of mutual social trust between border populations), or institutional (e.g. involving stakeholder commitment to projects).

The research to date points to a lack of any single, universal pattern for the development of cross-border cooperation, i.a. because this always takes place differently, given involved entities being embedded in different conditions that make comparison difficult (Leibenath & Knippschild, 2011; Durand & Decoville, 2020). The observed diversity of (formal-legal, cultural, economic, and other) conditions for the development of border areas can potentially therefore exert diverse influence on the attitudes entities take to cross-border cooperation, including in the matters of motivation for becoming involved, expected benefits, or perceived barriers. It would in fact seem to be more, rather than less, important to recognise the attitudes involved, given the significant influence they can have in shaping integration processes, in the long term in particular.

Cross-border cooperation as part of EU Cohesion Policy

The development of international near-border and cross-border cooperation in Europe, and indeed the terminology connected with that issue, has gained broad and comprehensive discussion (e.g. Perkmann, 1999, 2007; Blatter & Clement, 2000; Scott, 2012; Dołzblasz & Raczyk, 2015; Wassenberg et al., 2015; Medeiros, 2018; Decoville & Durand, 2019; Noferini et al., 2020; Nijkamp, 2021). Cross-border cooperation is considered a very important element in the formation of borderlands, and a key pillar of European integration (Komornicki, 2021). It has also been the subject of extensive debate relating to the regional-policy paradigm as it relates to border regions (Jakubowski & Miszczuk, 2021). Projects financed under European Territorial Cooperation, an important component of EU Cohesion Policy, play a special role in the pursuit of cross-border cooperation, with a primary objective of harmonious economic, social and territorial development of the EU being promoted (Więckowski, 2021). Experience shows that the projects involved here usually constitute the most important form of cross-border institutional cooperation, as pursued at local and regional levels. Moreover, this cooperation represents the point of departure as other cross-border activities develop, be they formal or informal (Dołzblasz & Raczyk, 2015).

The pioneering work on cooperation focused on its institutional dimension, and related to matters of integration, in the European context especially. There was analysis of legal conditions nationally and internationally, plus description of extant institutional structures of cooperation, along with their instruments, activities and documents.

Equally, as time has passed, research has broadened out considerably, with the spectrum of issues addressed diversifying considerably. Published works have covered the practical side of pursuing cross-border cooperation, with it generally being stressed how great a challenge this can be (even where borders are highly permeable). Factors accounting for that start with lack of symmetry and mutual trust (Blasco et al., 2014), but also include bureaucratisation, and the implementation of activities within administrative structures on one side of a border only (Matthiesen & Burkner, 2001), the confinement of cooperation to the opportunities it offers for EU funds to be obtained (Scott, 1999; Blasco et al., 2014), and the difficulty (or even impossibility) of effective cross-border institutions being set up (Hooper & Kramsch, 2007).

Researchers have also come to study the cooperation pursued between companies (Van Geenhuizen & Van der Knaap, 1996; Dołzbłasz & Raczyk, 2017), or other institutions outside the public sector, while many works have been devoted to analysis of cooperation's determinants, it being noted how private ties, informal relationships based on friendship, and private acquaintanceships can be crucial (Sobczyński, 1995; Blasco et al., 2014).

It is in such contexts that the formation of relationships between cooperation partners in joint cross-border projects has been taken account of, given that partnerly relations i.a. affect the subjects, sustainability and effectiveness of cooperation, as well as the nature and strength of cross-border ties (Dołzbłasz & Raczyk, 2010b; Szmigiel-Rawska & Dołzbłasz, 2012).

Issues of stability

It is in the very nature of cross-border cooperation that no true formation 'overnight' is possible, with many years of integration (or disintegration) processes in fact being involved (i.a. Scott 2003; Blatter, 2004). This denotes a need for cooperation analyses with longer time horizons, in order for a number of features (and above all stability) to be encapsulated properly. The phenomenon of stability per se is generally viewed positively as far as the development of cooperation goes. Indications here i.a. relate to the stability of partnerships (i.a. Celińska-Janowicz et al., 2013), increased mutual confidence and ease of implementation of activities (van Houtum, 1998), the sustainability of the institutional set-up (i.a. Blatter, 2004; Biot, 2013), the role played by stability of conditions (Karppi, 2001), and the effects of long-term cooperation (Scott, 2003). As was noted by Van Der Zwet and Vironen (2013, p. 247): 'for Territorial Co-operation programmes to contribute to territorial integration, it should be accepted that programmes are a continuous learning process, and continuity, stability and maturity are crucial factors'. Equally, however – and as van Houtum (1998) indicates – stability of cooperation may come to denote staleness, and a so-called lock-in mechanism that reduces flexibility and creativity among the cooperating entities. In consequence, it would seem that 'cross-border territorial cooperation must (...) find a balance between the need for flexibility and adaption and the need for stability' (Biot, 2013, p. 176).

Cross-border cooperation's barriers and premises

Analyses of the barriers to cross-border cooperation have been crucial to ongoing research. According to ISIG and CoE (2013), barriers may be: institutional and legal, administrative, economic, related to levels of knowledge (including language skills), cultural, political, and related to stakeholders'

willingness to cooperate (as also mediated by availability of funding). In the context of economic development, there is a highlighting of legal, administrative, physical and socio-cultural barriers in particular (Camagni et al., 2019). Equally, as Capello et al. (2018) note, even a marked erasure of legal and administrative barriers does not automatically mean that economic growth processes are stimulated, when other barriers are affected. As a result, even the presence of single types of barrier can do much to inhibit growth and integration in borderlands. And it is the intriguing observation of Decoville and Durand (2019) that only certain cross-border flows that reflect active efforts to reduce a border's negative role will contribute to the strengthening of integration processes. Some activities do not contribute to, or are even observed to hinder, the integration in question (as is the case with sources of social tension in border areas).

Analyses of projects implemented as part of INTERREG cooperation also point to problems related to the need to determine in an unambiguous way the impacts exerted on integration processes in border areas. This denotes critical opinions regarding the actual effectiveness of implemented cross-border cooperation programmes from the point of view of European integration (e.g. Scott, 1999; Perkmann, 2007). What are above all involved here are situations in which the act of cross-border cooperation becomes an end in itself, and not least (merely) a means of raising funds (Scott, 1999), rather than of solving problems common to local communities either side of a border (Decoville & Durand, 2019).

When it comes to research conducted in the borderlands of Poland, and dedicated to analysis of the effects of the European integration process, work has mainly been concerned with the socio-economic and spatial dimensions (i.a. Gorzelak et al., 2004; Gorzelak & Krok, 2006; Krok & Smętkowski, 2006; Dołzbłasz & Raczyk, 2010a; Kozak et al., 2012; Gorzelak & Zawalińska, 2013; Miszczuk, 2013; Dołzbłasz, 2017), including in the evaluation of cooperation programmes (i.a. Bachtler et al., 2005; Olejniczak, 2008). Only rarely have researchers attempted to address the issues within organisations' motives for embarking upon cooperation, and also concerning durability in a cross-border context (Szmigiel-Rawska & Dołzbłasz, 2012; Szmigiel-Rawska, 2013).

Bearing in mind the aspiration articulated in EU Cohesion Policy – that barriers resulting from the existence of borders and adversely affecting the socio-economic space should be eliminated in a more permanent manner (EU, 2013; Dühr, 2021; Jakubowski & Miszczuk, 2021), the issue of cooperation's stability seems important – more so as it remains a phenomenon relating to EU-financed cooperation programmes that has so far been addressed only relatively rarely, especially through comprehensive, in-depth study considering a longer time-horizon. This is probably due to the complexity and ambiguity of the very concept of stability in the social sciences, and the way the phenomenon is considered primarily as it affects cooperation between people or organisations (including economic entities), or else interstate cooperation that rarely focuses in on the border context.

Methods

In the light of the above, the analysis pursued and presented here envisaged the surveying of all organisations involved in the pursuit of the cross-border cooperation projects (other than those entailing Technical Assistance) financed from EU funds in the whole 2007–2020 period, via programmes as follows (EC, 2006; EU, 2013):

- European Territorial Cooperation 2007-2013 (Poland-Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern/ Brandenburg-Poland, Saxony-Poland, Czech Republic-Poland, Poland- Slovakia, Lithuania-Poland),

- the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument 2007-2013 (Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, Lithuania-Poland-Russia),
- *INTERREG 2014-2020* (Brandenburg-Poland, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern/Brandenburg-Poland, Poland-Saxony, Czech Republic-Poland, Poland- Slovakia, Lithuania-Poland),
- the European Neighbourhood Instrument 2014-2020 (Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, Poland-Russia).

This denoted a spatial scope for the study extending to all Polish borders on land, be these EU internal frontiers (Poland-Germany, Poland-Czechia, Poland-Slovakia, Poland-Lithuania) or else external ones (Poland-Ukraine, Poland-Belarus, Poland-Russia). The time horizon of the study denoted some 2307 entities located on both sides of Poland's borders, implementing a total of 1577 cross-border cooperation projects in the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 periods. The list of organisations, and contact details thereto, were obtained from the databases of the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, as well as the technical secretariats of the programmes examined. In addition, the keep.eu database developed as part of the INTERACT Programme was used to extend and update information on the organisations (including as regards contact). The outcome here was a full and complete database on all relevant organisations.

For the purpose of the analysis, the authors classified organisations into formal/legal categories as local-, supralocal- and regional-government units, organisational units representing local or regional authorities, entities financed from the national budget, non-governmental sector organisations, *Euroregions*¹, and churches and religious associations. The above classification in fact represents the authors' modified version of one proposed by Dołzbłasz (2017).

The study was then further pursued using the technique of the computer-assisted web interview (CAWI), entailing the filling-out of an electronic survey questionnaire with respondents, the link to which was sent by e-mail. Qualitative research based on a survey questionnaire gains quite common use in studies into the beneficiaries of cross-border cooperation programmes (e.g. Płoszaj, 2014; Szmigiel-Rawska 2016; Kurowska-Pysz & Szczepańska-Woszczyzna, 2017; Lange, 2018; Tiganasu et al., 2020). The study was run from mid-2021 through to the beginning (first quarter) of 2022. It resulted in the obtainment of responses from 262 organisations, or 11.4% of the units potentially includable in the study. This value relates to surveys completed in full, given that those only completed in part were rejected (notwithstanding this being a fairly common occurrence due to the voluminous nature of the form). The response level was deemed to be influenced by:

- the relatively long assumed time horizon of the analysis (2007–2020) – ensuring that certain organisations were no longer functioning or had changed their scope of activity and/or contact details² by the time the study was conducted (moreover, where much time had elapsed since a cooperation project was implemented, consent for participation in the study was far less likely to be forthcoming, in particular where those once involved had ceased to work in a given organisation).
- the February 2022 outbreak of war in Ukraine plus political tensions in advance of that – this was reflected in a very poor level of response from the parties involved in the conflict, be they Russia and Belarus on the one hand, or Ukraine on the other.

A relatively low return rate is a significant if familiar problem for much of the survey research carried out in the social sciences. In our case, it remains very hard to assess if the organisations in cross-border cooperation that did participate may or may not be deemed representative of the entire population thereof. Whatever the case may be, the detailed figures this paper presents re-

¹ Although euroregions take the form of associations, due to the subject matter of this article and their importance for cross-border cooperation they have been singled out as a separate category.

² Mainly it concerned organizations of the non-governmental sector.

late solely to the population of organisations completing questionnaires. And it was on the basis of these that general qualitative conclusions for cross-border cooperation were formulated. Clearly, some caution is recommended in relating these conclusions to the entire population of organisations involved in cross-border cooperation.

The analyses were based on methods of describing a statistical community after Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008). As far as the collected source material allowed, data were tabulated in terms of their relating to Polish organisations, those from other EU Member States (Germany, Czechia, Lithuania and Slovakia), or organisations from non-EU states (Belarus, Russia and Ukraine). Qualitative study was preceded by quantitative analysis of all projects and their beneficiaries.

Results

The aforesaid responses from 262 organisations included 56.9% which were Polish-based organizations, 34.7% originating in other EU countries (Germany, Czechia, Slovakia and Lithuania), and 8.4% from beyond the EU (Ukraine, Belarus and Russia). The profiles of the surveyed organisations reflected regulations adopted at EU level concerning beneficiaries of cooperation programmes. Most often involved were units of local and regional government (e.g. authorities at local, county or regional levels), organizational units run by local authorities (like schools and community centres), units financed by state budgets (e.g. the Police, state forestry units, Fire Brigades, and units managing national roads), and NGOs (associations and foundations, including *Euroregions*). The structure characterising organisations cooperating along different stretches of the border proved relatively standardised, even if minor differences could be observed. These reflected the roles and competences of different levels to the territorial organisation of given countries in implementing public policies, as well as the degree to which civil society is developed, and the organisational capacity it proves capable of. A marked dominance of local-government units was noticeable (Raczyk & Dołzbłasz, 2022), with only a relatively minor role for the NGO sector. This skewing of the structure certainly influenced the results of the research.

Most research on reasons for cooperation has focused on the logic underpinning cooperation policy, rather than underlying reasons for a decision to commence with cooperation taken at the level of the individual organisation (beneficiary). However, the opinions of respondents were examined in the study referred to here, with the results revealing how ‘common goals’ was a major factor behind established cooperation in all types of borderland (which accounted for over 70% of responses, Fig. 1). Spatial accessibility vis-à-vis a partner was also of great importance (achieving a score around 50%), given the way that made frequent direct interaction a real possibility. This supports the observation from Axelrod (1984) – that an important condition for the establishment and stability of mutual relations is straightforwardly the frequency with which they occur (or else the repeatability of contacts). However, it should be noted that, unlike with the results of those studies, where cross-border cooperation is concerned, frequency of relations alone may prove insufficient to establish cooperation, unless accompanied by such other factors as the aforementioned common goals.

A further important factor involved expected benefits (tangible and intangible), be these personal (or organisational) or general social (in regional development), albeit with the latter indicated less often. Personal contacts also prove of great importance, with this factor characterised by the greatest differentiation to assessments, depending on the location of organisations in the different borderlands. For this was rated lowest by Polish entities (on 32%), and much higher by entities from non-EU countries (52%) and other EU Member States (67%).

Factors indicated by over 30% of respondents also included: willingness to integrate socially, a community of values, and previous informal cooperation. At the same time, it should be noted that informal cooperation is of greater importance than formal where cross-border projects are to be implemented and pursued.

In light of the obtained results, establishing cross-border relations with a specific partner with the aim of implementing a joint project can be seen to result from the complex coexistence of a number of premises, rather than a single factor. For the average number of factors indicated was five in the case of Polish organisations and six where organisations from other EU states were concerned. This shows that the establishment of cross-border cooperation should rather be treated as a multifaceted and internally complex process, relatively difficult to shape freely within cooperation policy. At the same time, though this process reflects the very different goals of individual organisations, the factors are mostly not mutually exclusive, and can support each other synergistically. In this context, only the combination (reconciliation) of the interest of a given organisation and the general interest seems problematic.

From the point of view of the stability of cross-border relations, some premises indicated (like geographical proximity, previous cooperation) seem conducive to stability, while some (like expected benefits for the organisation) are not. Hence, in the obtainment of stable relations, a matter of importance is the nature of the common goals constituting the basis of the cooperation, and in particular the extent to which these are long-term and/or short-term (or even incidental) in nature.

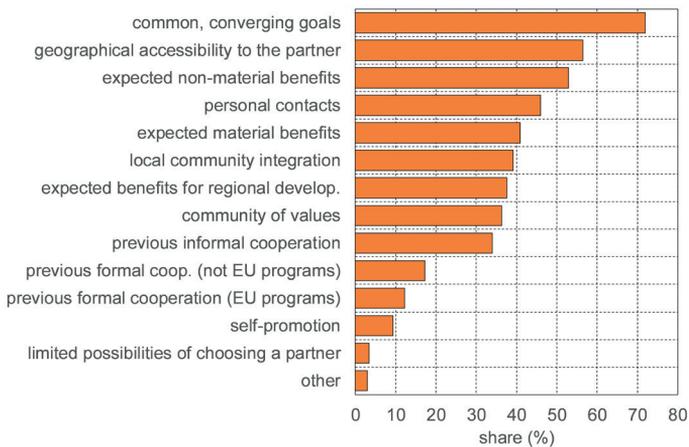


Figure 1. Factors influencing the establishment of cooperation from the perspective of organisations participating in cross-border cooperation projects implemented in Poland's borderlands in the years 2007–2013 and 2014–2020
Source: author's own study.

Among factors taken to influence partners of projects implemented in 2007–2013 going on with cooperation in the next (2014–2020) programming period, the most important role was played by positive experiences (appearing in over 86% of responses) (Fig. 2). The more projects were seen as successful from the points of view of all participating organisations, the greater the chance of further joint activities. What is particularly important here is that the group of the eight most important factors for establishing cooperation also played a key role in its continuation. At the same time, for the continuation of cooperation, the combined importance of these factors was even greater in all cases, even as the same hierarchy of importance as in the case of establishing cooperation was maintained. This attests to the special role of the identified factors in shaping cooperation at its

various stages. It also indicates how the formulation of a cooperation policy aimed at strengthening this group of factors at the same time serves the establishment and maintenance of cross-border relations. The relative identity of the factors involved in establishing and continuing cooperation may also suggest that whether established relations will be continued with in future or be replaced by relations with new partners depends primarily on the barriers (limitations) to cooperation.

In the group of indicated factors relating to continuing cooperation, the factor of personal contacts deserves special emphasis, given importance that was clearly greater (by 19 percentage points) than where the establishing of relationships was concerned. This probably reflected the very high level of importance of mutual trust, and the intensity of informal relations. As a result, on the one hand, the implementation of joint projects should be aimed at strengthening personal, informal, interpersonal contacts because the chance for further cooperation increases greatly where that happens. On the other hand, the basing of an organisation’s cooperation on the contacts of only a few individuals poses a major risk that cooperation will cease where these people are absent (e.g. in the event of illness or their leaving the job). Therefore, a desire to increase the stability of cross-border relations would seem to justify the creation of rich networks of personal relations (at the level of individual organisations) that are therefore resistant to random events and the natural phenomenon that is personnel exchange.

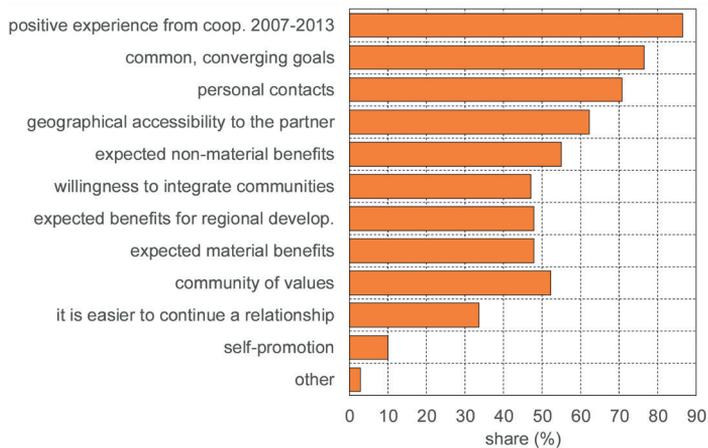


Figure 2. Factors influencing the continuation of cooperation started in 2007–2013 and maintained in 2014–2020, from the perspective of organisations participating in cross-border cooperation projects implemented in Polish borderlands
 Source: author’s own study.

About one-third of the organisations pointed to it simply being easier to continue with existing relationships, rather than to establish new ones. This may reflect the phenomenon of inertia in cross-border relations, which in part reflects the passive way in which a number of organisations function, probably applying in particular to public-sector entities, which definitely dominate the structure when it comes to the identities of beneficiaries of cross-border projects.

With regard to the factors underpinning non-continuation of cooperation, attention should be paid to frequencies of indication that are observed to be much lower than where establishing and continuing cooperation are concerned. On average, slightly over two premises are supplied. This suggests strongly that, while many factors had to come together for cooperation to be either established or continued with, just a small number of such are enough to cause cooperation to cease. In other words, it is most often the case that the factors mentioned result in the absolute

precluding of further activity. It seems that this explains quite well the low degree of stability of formal cross-border cooperation between organisations, understood as a repetition of mutual relations. Among the total number of organisations, only about 20% of entities participated in projects in both (2007–2013 and 2014–2020) programming periods.

Financial issues were of the greatest importance to the lack of continuation of cooperation, mainly the lack of own funds to finance or co-finance joint activities (in over 24% of indications) (Fig. 3). A group of six factors with fairly similar shares (12%–16%) played a major role. These encompassed formal issues, most often related to restrictions or changes in the scope of the subject of support, eligibility of expenditure, the functioning of project consortia, or the fact that support from EU funds was not obtained. This group also includes factors related to changes in the priorities of the organisations involved in the cooperation, differences in their goals, differences in the way they operate, and limitations in the field of human resources.

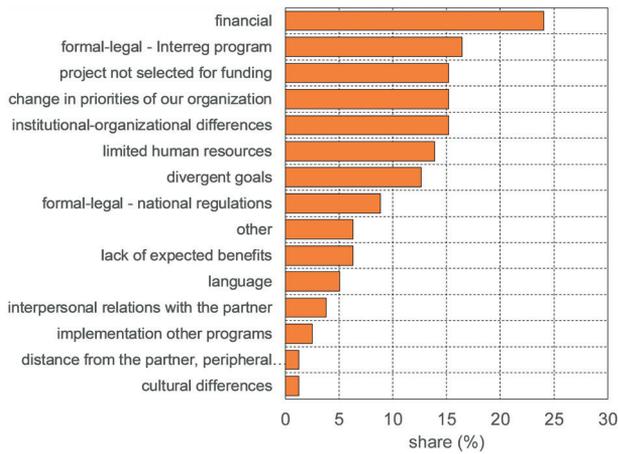


Figure 3. Factors influencing the non-continuation of cooperation in the next (2014–2020) programming period, from the perspective of organisations participating in cross-border cooperation projects implemented in Poland's borderlands in the years 2007–2013
Source: author's own study.

The language factor, often indicated as a significant barrier to cross-border cooperation, was not shown to be of more than minor importance to respondents in this study. This was partly due to the research concerning formal cooperation, where the level of importance was considered lower than it would be where cooperation is informal. This factor probably in any case played a greater role in the establishing of cooperation than in non-continuation. The minor importance of the factor of physical distance between partners can seemingly be interpreted analogously.

The study also attempts to identify the most important barriers to the development of cross-border cooperation (in its various manifestations). Although the list of barriers indicated by the respondents was quite extensive, the most important were language, formal and legal, and bureaucratic factors, as well as those related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Fig. 4). The issues of cultural differences and difficulties associated with finding a suitable partner on the other side of the border were considered much less important. Others, such as geographical distance, difficulties in terms of crossing the border and in the flow of information, corruption, currency issues, or differences in the level of socio-economic development, were indicated rather incidentally. At the same time, the specificity of particular types of borderland can be observed; for example, at the

borders with non-EU countries, the greater importance of political barriers related to crossing the border, finding a partner, and corruption, as well as the definitely lesser importance of the language barrier (Slavic languages). On the other hand, organisations from other EU countries bordering Poland were much more inclined to point to bureaucratic barriers.

The catalogue of benefits related to the implementation of cooperation projects was quite wide from the perspective of their beneficiaries (Fig. 5). Note worthily, the most important of these primarily included direct or indirect benefits for the organisation, including the exchange of experience, the development of mutual relations and contacts, joint projects, the acquisition of new skills by employees, and the use of EU funds. Community-wide benefits were indicated much less often, and concerned, for example, the integration of local communities, the development of tourism, the protection of cultural heritage, better acquaintanceship with the neighbouring country, the development of public services, and the development of elements of infrastructure. It should be noted that only a marginal role was played by benefits related closely to the general objectives of European integration, as formulated in documents shaping EU cooperation policy, and including the breaking of stereotypes and limitation of the role of the border as a barrier to processes of social and economic development (e.g. by integrating labour markets and expanding the network of cross-border connections). Most important for the respondents were the benefits felt directly, easy to assess, and mainly related to the practices of everyday life. This indicates that the pursuit of EU cross-border cooperation objectives is possible when these relate primarily to the meeting of the needs of local communities and the linking up of these needs with a border context.

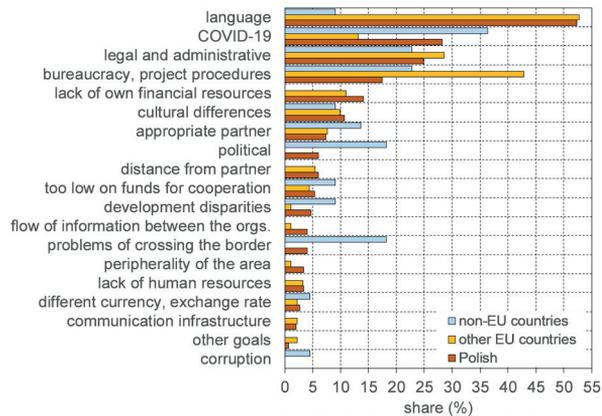


Figure 4. Barriers to cooperation within cross-border cooperation projects implemented in the borderlands of Poland in the years 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, as perceived by organisations engaged in the cooperation
 Source: author’s own study.

It should also be emphasised that respondents hardly noticed the benefits of any language barrier being overcome, despite this being one of the most important (aforementioned) barriers to cooperation. The apparent paradox may reflect the way in which cooperation projects were scarcely related to the development and implementation of systemic change, and, therefore mostly failed to induce relevant shifts (e.g. with regard to the teaching of the language of the neighbouring country in public schools). This by the way encourages a rather critical assessment of effectiveness, when it comes to this aspect of the ongoing implementation of cross-border cooperation programmes.

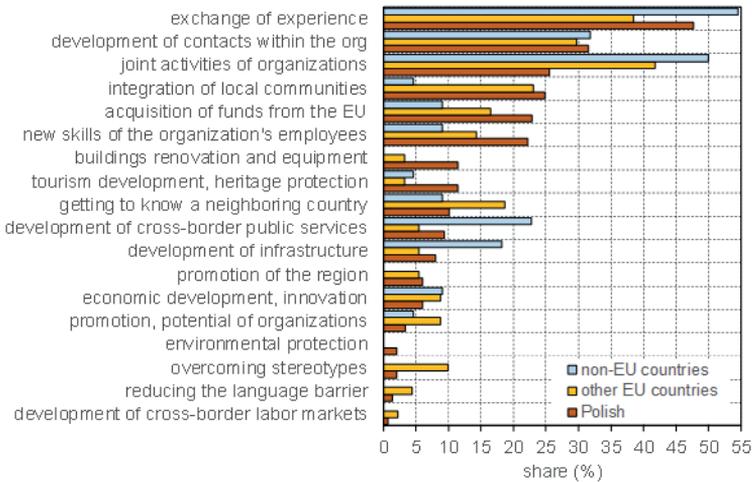


Figure 5. Benefits of cooperation under cross-border cooperation projects implemented in the borderlands of Poland in the years 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, as perceived by organisations engaged in the cooperation
Source: author's own study.

The study also examined the intensity of the cooperation attested to by respondents (Fig. 6). That said, the attempt at interpretation must be seen as affected by the way organisations not involved in such cooperation were much less likely to participate in the study; with the consequence that opinions of the most active organisations must be viewed as overrepresented. Analysis thus sought to focus primarily on relative changes in the intensity of cooperation over time, rather than on a detailed analysis at a specific moment. Such comparisons with the initial period show clearly a very marked increase in the intensity of mutual relations in the course of work to implement joint cross-border projects. And, seemingly most important of all, there is only a slight reported decrease in this level of intensity following completion of the said projects. This ensures that the level of intensity of cooperation in the period following a joint project's completion remains at a level significantly higher than in the period prior to commencement. The suggestion is thus that cross-border cooperation projects as funded by the EU are not just one-time, one-off undertakings, but also translate into a general increase in the level of cooperation, and in a time horizon extending beyond that of the project itself. It is of course probable that the scale of this increase varied from one type of project to another.

Perhaps surprisingly, the obtained results also indicate that organisations in non-EU countries provide slightly more-favourable assessments of the intensity of cooperation before and after project implementation. This may reflect their attachment of slightly greater importance to cooperation (and hence more-favourable assessment regarding strength), as compared with the organisations based in EU Member States.

This corresponds with the observation from Komornicki (2021) – that EU-funded cooperation programmes have a role to play that is greater than would be suggested by the level of the financial outlay alone. This is because they also play an important symbolic and preparatory role related to the opening-up of opportunities for further cooperation (both formal and informal).

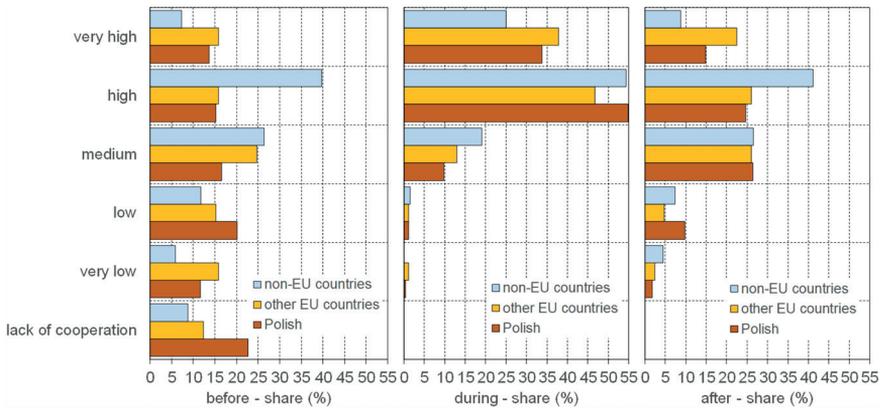


Figure 6. Intensity of cooperation before, during and after project completion, as perceived by organisations pursuing cross-border cooperation projects in Poland's borderlands in the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 periods
 Source: author's own study.

Conclusions

The research conducted can be seen to make a new contribution to knowledge on the functioning of cross-border cooperation, given that previous work has focused solely on the identification of premises, and barriers in general. Here, the focus has been to determine specific premises underpinning the establishment and continuation (or lack of continuation) of cooperation between specific partners. Leaving aside the case studies produced by individual project consortia, this is not a matter that has hitherto gained any more-extensive research. Moreover, past research has not addressed the context of stability of cooperation.

The research detailed here is able to show how the establishment and subsequent maintenance of cross-border relations reflect a complex process whereby many premises co-exist at the same time. There is nevertheless a relatively high degree of similarity to the catalogues of premises seemingly essential to the said founding and continuing of cooperation. Equally, only a small number of factors (one or two barriers, e.g. a lack of financial resources) need to come into play for cooperation with a given partner to be interrupted. This conclusion seems of rather major significance, since matters of the co-occurrence of the factors in question have not featured in any broader academic debate. The results emphasise the relative fragility of cross-border relations, showing how cross-border cooperation (in its formal dimension at least) is characterised by a lack of stability, where this is understood as repeat activity engaged in by cooperation partners.

At the same time, the obtained results correspond with those of other research in pointing to a low level of stability among organisations and partnerships participating in EU-funded cross-border cooperation projects (Dołzbłasz & Raczyk, 2022). Such conclusions imply a need for somewhat-different shaping of cooperation development policy, whether at the levels of the EU, state or region. In fact, irrespective of the level at which it is formulated, policy should extend comprehensive and concurrent support, not just to individual factors, but to all relevant factors, seen as capable of influencing initiation and continuation. We demonstrate here that support for single factors only, will not yield the expected results when it comes to intensifying cooperation.

All the most important barriers to cooperation will also need counteracting, with account also taken of the lack of stability inherent in the mechanisms by which organisations cooperate.

From this point of view, a very important role is played by the main nodes of the cooperation networks shaped in the different borderlands of Poland, which possess the greatest potential for stability (Dołzbłasz & Raczyk 2021). In this context, there should be broader discussion surrounding the desired model for the development of cross-border cooperation, and whether this should be based on support for the most-stable cooperation nodes, or else aimed at including as many new organisations as possible. The expected result in the latter case may be a lack of stability to the organisational system involved in cross-border relations.

On this basis, the most beneficial solution might perhaps entail the adoption of a hybrid model combining, on the one hand, the existence of a small number of main and stable cooperation hubs; and, on the other, a large group of organisations only engaging more sporadically in cross-border projects. The relevant studies to date have not addressed such matters sufficiently, despite their clear importance to the understanding of mechanisms.

The barriers to cross-border cooperation identified in this study correspond with the results of previous research (Capello et al., 2018; Camagni et al., 2019; Klatt & Winkler, 2020), indicating the importance of barriers relating to language, matters formal and legal, and bureaucracy specifically. This strongly suggests the prevalence and relative persistence of these elements. It is nevertheless true that some barriers identified in the literature (ISIG & CoE, 2013) did not make a significant appearance in our work. And, as these were mainly economic barriers related to differences in the level of socio-economic development, or else fiscal problems, this was potentially a reflection of the specific nature of organisations participating in INTERREG cooperation programmes, in which (with just a few exceptions) most companies had not participated.

In turn, among the most common advantages of cooperation, the dominant aspects were (direct or indirect) benefits from the point of view of the organisation. This by the way denotes a core idea that successful and full implementation of the main objectives of the EU's cross-border cooperation policy will only prove possible where they also meet the specific needs of local communities living in border areas.

The results obtained to indicate the primary importance of such utilitarian goals of cross-border cooperation seem to confirm the observations from Decoville and Durand (2019) – that the projects implemented within its framework should be treated as a means of solving common problems of everyday life, and not as ends in themselves, as is sometimes the case. This conclusion needs to be taken account of in EU cross-border cooperation policy.

The present research also shows how one effect of the implementation of cross-border cooperation projects is a general increase in the intensity of relations observed (even) after their completion. This confirms the observation of Darvas et al. (2019), formulated in relation to the phenomenon of knowledge spillovers, that the positive effects of partnerships extend beyond the scope and duration of projects funded by INTERREG programmes. In this context, it seems reasonable to undertake further research identifying the projects most desirable from the point of view of engendering long-term cross-border effects, as well as the mechanisms most conducive to the further, independent (i.e. non-induced or externally-sustained) development of cross-border relations in border areas.

Acknowledgment

The article has been prepared within the framework of the Project entitled 'Stability of transborder co-operation on the example of borderlands of Poland' (2018/31/B/HS4/00550) financed by the National Science Centre, Cracow, Poland.

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