

## Introduction

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The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented example of a crisis that greatly affected in the recent years many areas of people's lives and many aspects of the functioning of public institutions, as well as other commercial or social organisations. Disruptions accompanying the pandemic, such as the introduction of social isolation, changes to office and team working conditions, e.g., in projects, restrictions on the organisation of meetings or events involving a large number of people, as well as travel and, above all, border crossing restrictions, are just a few examples of the negative consequences of this crisis, which also affected cross-border integration and cooperation, as well as implementing cross-border projects.

Despite measures taken over many years to strengthen the socio-economic convergence of the countries of the European Union, as well as the promotion of European Territorial Cooperation through, for example, INTERREG programmes, the outbreak of the pandemic quickly exposed the fragility of cross-border relations and even led to a resurgence of antagonism in such relations. In the face of the pandemic, the inadequacies of cross-border cooperation mechanisms and weaknesses in the management

of cross-border projects were quickly recognised, despite years of support for these activities through funds from the INTERREG programmes. In some borderlands, restrictions on border crossings or border closures even led to the cessation of cross-border cooperation and the suspension of many projects. Neighbourhood communities living together in the borderlands got separated and the bonds built between them began to loosen.

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cross-border cooperation in projects has already been the subject of many studies, a comprehensive assessment of the issue only became possible in 2022–2023. A question thus appeared: how to strengthen the resilience of cross-border cooperation to crises and disruptions, through the adequate management of cross-border projects. This issue, which is still rather poorly studied by the scientific community, was chosen by the authors as the research problem of the study.

The objective of this study is to identify factors related to the management of cross-border projects co-financed by the INTERREG programmes, as well as factors related to the cooperation of partners in these projects, which contribute to strengthening the resilience of cross-border cooperation to crises and disruptions.

The authors posed the following research questions:

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the phases of cross-border projects co-financed by the INTERREG programmes?
2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the management of cross-border projects co-financed by the INTERREG programmes?
3. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect cross-border partnerships cooperation in projects co-financed by the INTERREG programmes?

4. How relevant were the different types of skills involved in managing cross-border projects co-financed by the INTERREG programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Which elements shape the resilience of cross-border cooperation to crises?
6. How do the elements that shape the resilience of cross-border cooperation to crises relate to the management of cross-border projects co-financed by the INTERREG programmes?

In order to answer the research questions, the authors analysed a number of theoretical issues and carried out empirical research. The first chapter, authored by E. Medeiros, presents, *inter alia*, the evolution of the European cross-border cooperation in borderlands with the involvement of INTERREG programmes, as well as the barriers to cross-border cooperation and the possibilities for their mitigation through, *inter alia*, the activities of Euroregions and European Groups of Territorial Cooperation. Chapter two and chapter three, authored by H. Böhm, discuss, among other things, the determinants of cross-border cooperation and the issue of borderland resilience to crises and disruptions, as well as the management of cross-border partnerships. The multidimensional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cross-border integration and cooperation in cross-border projects is also presented. Chapter four, authored by J. Kurowska-Pysz, presents the cross-border project environment, characterises cross-border project stakeholders and discusses the life cycle of a cross-border project. In the fifth chapter, J. Kurowska-Pysz presents the methodology of research conducted by her in the interpretative paradigm. The method of incomplete numerical induction was selected as the general method of investigation. The research used specific methods such as desk research analysis, survey, individual in-depth interview, as well as non-participant observation of the process of cross-border project management in the COVID-19

pandemic period. Advanced statistical methods were used to analyse the collected data. The results of the research are presented in the chapter six separately for the Franco-German and Polish-Czech borderlands, as well as in summary, to analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on, among other things, the management of cross-border projects (e.g., project implementation phases and management activities in projects), on cross-border cooperation in these projects and on building the resilience of cross-border cooperation to crises and disruptions.

The study focuses on cross-border micro-projects implemented in the borderlands of the European Union with the co-financing of INTERREG programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e., between 2020 and 2022. Due to budgetary constraints and objective difficulties in conducting research during the pandemic period, it was assumed that the study would include two internal borderlands of the European Union, presenting different characteristics and approaches to cross-border cooperation. These were the Franco-German borderland, where cross-border projects are being implemented with support from the INTERREG V Upper-Rhine 2014–2020 Programme, and the Polish-Czech borderland, where this support was provided by the INTERREG V the Czech Republic – Poland 2014–2020 Programme.

A total of 149 respondents took part in the quantitative survey, including 60 representatives of partners implementing cross-border projects in the Franco-German borderland and 89 representatives of partners implementing cross-border projects in the Polish-Czech borderland. The samples of respondents for this research were selected in a non-random manner. This was due to difficulties in reaching some project beneficiaries, as well as difficulties in ascertaining the actual implementation status of many projects during the pandemic period, as well as the special conditions for conducting research between January and June 2022,

including those related to travel restrictions, on-line communication and the interruption of many projects.

The seventh chapter, authored by J. Kurowska-Pysz, presents the conclusions of the research regarding, among other things:

- identification of the spheres of influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on cross-border project management against the background of the cross-border project life cycle;
- indication of the groups of skills important in managing cross-border projects during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- definition of relationships between phases of the cross-border project life cycle and factors explaining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cross-border cooperation in projects;
- identification of the elements shaping the resilience of cross-border cooperation to crises and the correlation between selected elements shaping resilience and skills relevant for managing cross-border projects in times of crisis – separately for each borderland studied.

The authors hope that the content can be an inspiration for theoreticians and practitioners involved in cross-border cooperation and cross-border project management who see the need to incorporate the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic into their future activities. The study may also be useful for all institutions and organisations operating in the borderlands that are aware of the risk of further crises and disruptions in the future and want to make efforts to strengthen the resilience of cross-border cooperation to such unexpected events. The conclusions of the work also clearly signal the need for competence development of professionals involved in cross-border project management and cross-border cooperation. Indeed, research shows that, in times of crisis, their knowledge and skills are crucial in strengthening relationships between partners and thus contributing to the objectives of the European Territorial Cooperation and the effective use of funds from INTERREG programmes.



# EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL COOPERATION – THE NEW APPROACH TOWARDS COHESION IN BORDERLANDS

## 1.1. Introduction

Since the end of the 1970s, the idea of implementing multiannual and ‘integrated development programmes’ had been tested by the European Commission (EC). But it was only in 1988 that a multiannual framework procedure for European Union (EU) cohesion policy started to be implemented, with a view to increasing its efficiency. This novel strategic approach also improved the potential for engaging national, regional and local governments to achieve the overarching goal of EU cohesion policy: the promotion of a more balanced and sustainable development of Europe’s regions, across policies and country borders, towards EU territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2008).

Running parallel to this, the implementation of principles such as partnership, transparency, subsidiarity, as well as civil society participation, has contributed to cement the cooperation between the public and private sectors. Likewise, such principles have supported territorial decentralisation processes and a more

active involvement from regional and local authorities in policy implementation. Crucially, this place-based policy approach ends up giving a relevant role to each European territory ‘in the sense that it is not an obstacle to the optimal allocation of economic activity but can become a source of growth on its own’ (European Commission, 2008, p. 3).

Under this context, the INTERREG Community Initiative (CI) was introduced in 1990 as one of the 14 CIs (Table 1.1), used as special financing instruments for EU structural policy. Their main goal was to complement the Community Support Frameworks (CSFs), which were agreements negotiated between the Member-States and the EC, laying down priorities for the EU structural and cohesion funds interventions, at the regional and national level (European Commission, 1991).

In a nutshell, the first INTERREG-A was based on 14 pilot projects experience, designed to tackle the structural development difficulties of EU border areas, which took place in 1989 (European Commission, 2007). Initially, the INTERREG-A was intended to prepare the border areas for an EU without internal borders (European Commission, 2007), as well as to ‘compensate for the introduction of the Single Market and soften the blow for border regions, which, everyone thought, would suffer most from the abolition of economic borders’ (European Commission, 2015, p. 4).

As seen in Table 1, right from the onset, the INTERREG (1990–1993) became the most well-financed Community Initiative. Basically, it was implemented through 31 Operational Programmes (OP), in its strand A (Cross-Border Cooperation – CBC). As expected, this first INTERREG-A covered the border areas (NUTS 3) of the older EU Member States (Fig. 1.1).

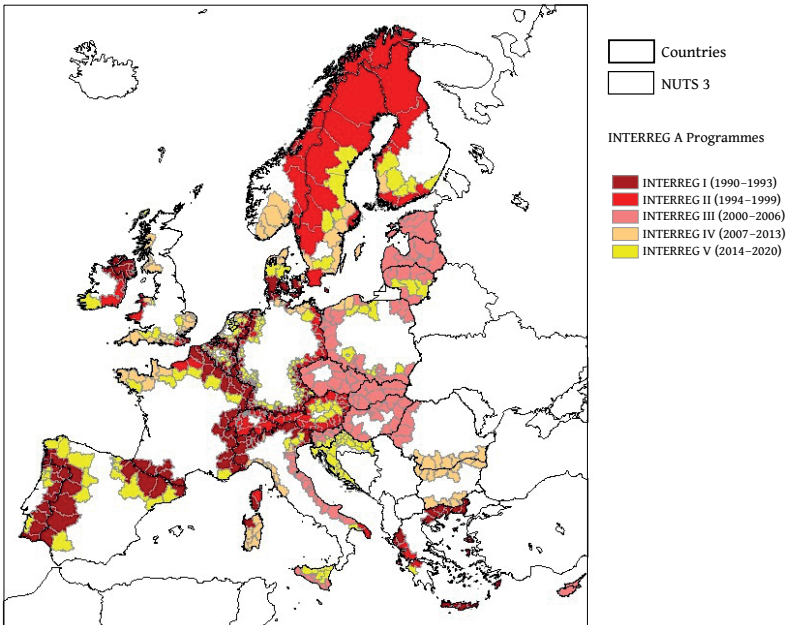


**Table 1.1.** Community Initiatives in 1989–1993

Name	Goal	Million Euros
INTERREG 1990–1993	Promoting the cooperation among border regions and revitalising those areas located at the furthest borders of the community.	800
NOW 1990–1993	Focusing on women who should take advantage of the equal opportunities in the field of employment and vocational training.	120
HORIZON 1990–1993	Promoting the economic, professional and social integration of the disabled people and certain underprivileged groups.	180
LEADER 1991–1993	Promoting the implementation of innovative solutions for the rural development.	400
STRIDE 1990–1993	Strengthening the innovative capacity and the technological development.	400
RECHAR 1989–1993	Diversifying the economic activities of the coal fields, promoting the creation of new activities, the development of those already existing, the improvement of the environment and the support to the vocational training.	300
ENVIREG 1990–1993	Promoting the improvement of the environment and the economic development of the less-developed regions.	500
KONVER 1993	Promoting the economic diversification of those regions depending on the defence sector.	130
REGIS 1990–1993	Intensifying the PCs in favour of the ultra-peripheral regions to promote the adaptation of their economy to the single market.	200
RETEX 1992–1993	Economic diversification of the areas depending on the textile and dress-making sectors.	100
PRISMA 1991–1993	Helping the companies of the less privileged areas to take advantage of the creation of the single market through the improvement of certain infrastructure and services.	100
REGEN 1990–1993	Facilitating the piping of natural gas and distribution of electricity in the less-developed regions.	300
TELEMÁTICA 1990–1993	Promoting the use of advanced telecommunication services in the less favoured regions.	200
EUROFORM 1990–1993	Developing new qualifications, skills and employment opportunities to promote their convergence on a community scale.	300

Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/archive/funds/prord/prordc/prdc4\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/funds/prord/prordc/prdc4_en.htm) – Adapted.

**Figure 1.1.** Evolution of the INTERREG-A Programmes since 1990



Source: author.

In the following EU cohesion policy programming period (1994–1999), the INTERREG II supported 59 Operational Programmes (OPs), with a total budget of €3.5 billion (1996 euros), with the lion’s share (more than 70%) concentrated in the strand A. Afterwards, the INTERREG III (2000–2006) saw the available budget for the 79 programmes grow exponentially (around 5.1 billion Euros). For the following programming period (2007–2013) the Interreg IV became the third objective of the EU cohesion policy, under the name of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) objective. Again, the cross-border cooperation strand received a significant increase in funding (6.44 billion euros). In the fifth programming period (2014–2020), the ETC objective was maintained, but now as one of the two main goals of EU cohesion policy, yet with a financial package (6.6 billion euros) similar to the previous phase.

The ongoing Interreg-VI (2021–2027) is due to receive almost 10 billion euros, ‘shared between almost 100 Interreg programmes across the borders, in and outside the EU, which will contribute to implementing the EU’s cohesion policy main priorities’. One novelty in this sixth Interreg generation is the addition of a fourth strand (D: Outermost Regions Programmes) alongside the mainstream strands (A: Cross-Border Cooperation + B: Transnational Cooperation + C: Interregional Cooperation). The following sections discuss how ETC can be reinforced and address challenges to European integration for the post-2017 EU cohesion policy phase.

## **1.2. Main achievements of INTERREG-ETC programmes**

As mentioned, EU cohesion policy aims to promote a more balanced, sustainable, and harmonious development of the EU territory. Indeed, since its first programming period, more than 70% of its total budget was allocated to the less developed regions of the EU, initially called ‘Objective 1’ regions, and since 2007 termed ‘convergence regions’. However, even though the INTERREG CI has been elevated into one of the main goals of the ETC of EU cohesion policy since 2007, the share of cohesion policy funding that both INTERREG and ETC have received has not changed significantly, as then as now representing less than 3% of the total EU cohesion policy funding (European Commission, 2014).

Also interesting is the fact that, for the most part, the INTERREG-A main goal was in promoting the socioeconomic development of EU cross-border regions, as well as unleashing their growth potential, while enhancing the cooperation process for the purposes of the overall harmonious development of the EU. For the 2007–2013 period, however, a concrete transversal emphasis was placed on the objective of reducing the negative effects of borders such as administrative, legal and physical barriers.