

The European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation as a Process of Europeanisation

James Wesley Scott

professor
Karelian Institute

Abstract

This contribution discusses how the concept and process of Europeanisation are linked to territorial and cross-border cooperation (CBC); it also delves into debate surrounding the various theoretical and normative assumptions that underpin understandings of both. The author argues that in order to gauge the significance of European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) it is necessary to consider how Europeanisation processes can be either ‘measured’ or otherwise ascertained. Evidence from research that investigates the role of CBC in European Cohesion Policy will be provided to foreground a brief discussion of EGTCs. Based on the experiences of EGTCs, the author ventures an interpretation of Europeanisation as a gradual process of co-creation. Moreover, focusing on its practical significance, the argument is put forward that, despite their shortfalls, EGTCs (as well as other forms of cross-border cooperation) represent networked and situated learning processes that connect communities together.

Keywords: EGTC, cross-border cooperation, governance, Cohesion Policy, border regions

Introduction

Cross-border Cooperation (CBC) and Territorial Cooperation (TC) have become hallmarks of the European Union’s political identity based on ‘open borders’. It is, for example, unsurprising that the establishment of the ‘borderless’ Schengen Area is considered to have been a crowning achievement of the European integration process. Both CBC and TC can be defined in terms of political projects carried out by private, state and, to an extent, third sector actors with the express goal of extracting benefit from joint initiatives in various economic, social, environmental and political fields. The more recent term of Territorial Co-operation indicates

an attempt on the part of the EU to broaden the scope and scale of CBC, most importantly reframing it in terms of local and regional platforms for achieving Cohesion Policy goals. Nevertheless, the two terms overlap in many ways. We could in fact see here already a case of distinguishing between different aspects of cooperation: while TC stands for a ‘technocratic’ and programmatic structuring of working relations across borders, primarily in the production of public goods, CBC can be more socially embedded as an everyday process of transcending borders - it is more inclusive as it also encompasses more mundane forms of interaction across borders. For the sake of this discussion, and to avoid confusion, the term CBC will be used throughout.

More than 30 years of active EU, national and local support of border-spanning collaboration projects indicate that benefits of CBC remain considerable. At the same time, local and regional cooperation across national borders has become embedded in the routines of many public authorities and civic associations. As part of the institutional maturation of cross-border cooperation, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) provide its members potentially forceful legal mandates for providing services of general interest and other public goods.

Nevertheless, when we ask the question whether the proliferation of CBC provides proof of Europeanisation we need to carefully consider what we mean. What in fact are the criteria we can employ for identifying Europeanisation? Does it, for example entail the diffusion of or convergence to a set of common norms, or something altogether different? This question is much too broad and complex to be dealt with within the space of a brief essay. However, critical reflection of normative understandings of the concept would appear necessary, particularly given the present situation of legitimacy crisis and politically orchestrated Euroscepticism. Even the word ‘governance’ can suggest a kind of convergence that could be misleading. More than three decades of research on CBC indicate instead that what we find are highly varied patterns of appropriation of cohesion policy and the tenets of territorial cooperation.

For the purposes of the discussion, I argue that Europeanisation can only be properly understood in ways that reflect Robert Ladrech’s (2002) suggestion that it is most basically about how conditions for action provided by the EU are transformed locally into action. This is of course a very broad definition, but working from it we can arrive at highly useful understandings of Europeanisation based on its pragmatic significance. I will specifically suggest that in the case of EGTCs we are talking about networked interstate relations and spheres of activity that emerge from EU-level policy. However, as this process is filtered through national institutions and legal frameworks, it also involves highly differentiated processes of alignment with EU objectives and policy paradigms.

EGTCs are complex institutional arrangements with a solid public law foundation and it is in fact legal stability that theoretically provides them with more effective means to deliver public goods, infrastructure investments, etc. EGTCs also promise more sustainable forms of partnership between different levels of decision-making cooperation. On the other hand, there are numerous indications that EGTCs have only partly succeeded in realising their potential, despite the fact that they have existed as partnership options since 2007. Based on existing evaluations we can in fact conclude that EGTCs are overall rather modest in their operations and the projects they have facilitated are relatively small-scale and targeted (see Engl & Evrard, 2018).

What then does the experience of EGTCs tell us about Europeanisation? This question can only be addressed within the broader context of CBC as it has evolved during the past three decades. However, this essay is intended to provide a conceptual contribution to the debate rather than a detailed empirical study; what I therefore will not provide here is a detailed assessment of CBC and EGTC achievements. This has been done convincingly by several scholars – and it is their partly on their insights that I will base my observations upon. With regard to Cohesion Policy in general, CBC has always been a ‘minor budget item’ but its beneficiaries and advocates remain staunch supporters not only of continued CBC policy mechanisms but of greater local and regional control over resources shared across borders. Technically, EGTCs promise both but, as experience indicates, the existence of opportunity structures does not automatically guarantee they will be employed as intended.

This brief essay begins with a general discussion of ways in which Europeanisation and cross-border cooperation are linked conceptually and the various theoretical and normative assumptions that underpin understandings of both. This also involves discussion of how processes of Europeanisation might be either ‘measured’ or otherwise ascertained. Some evidence from research on CBC more generally will be provided to foreground a brief discussion of EGTCs. Based on the experiences of EGTCs, I will venture an interpretation of Europeanisation as a gradual process of co-creation; focusing on its practical significance, I argue that, despite their shortfalls, EGTCs (as well as other forms of cross-border cooperation) represent networked and situated learning processes that connect communities together.

Europeanisation – Convergence, Diffusion, Something Else?

Having emerged in the aftermath of the momentous systemic changes of 1989, the idea of Europeanisation has largely revolved around the question whether membership in the EU – in the ‘new Europe’ as it were – signifies an inexorable process of institutional, political, economic and even cultural convergence (Cernat, 2006; Habermas & Derrida, 2003). Radelli (2004: 3) has in this sense provided a

comprehensive and widely used definition of Europeanisation as a process that includes the: "... a) construction, b) diffusion, and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, "ways of doing things" and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies". Similarly, another highly influential understanding of Europeanisation is that of a diffusion of norms regarding political agendas and procedures, social values and societal self-definitions (see, for example, Börzel & Risse, 2012). In a wider economic, institutional and policy sense, formal governance-centred understandings of Europeanisation has been supported by the idea of convergence which due to its putative measurability and hence verifiable nature has enjoyed academic prominence (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmayer, 2004; Simionescu, 2014).

Another area of potential convergence would involve the evolution of 'post-national' rules, norms and practices that recast national spaces as integral elements of an international political community. A central aspect of this process is the definition of agendas and policy practices that recast national spaces as integral elements of an international political community (Flockhart, 2010; Scott, 2015). From these derive objectives and values that – at least in theory – create a common set of discourses in which various political and social issues can be negotiated. This complementary understanding of Europeanisation suggests that new forms of politically relevant action can (or must) increasingly take place 'beyond the state' and beyond the inflexibilities of state territoriality. In this case, new border transcending forms of political and economic interaction – both institutional and informal – might promote economic and innovative strengths, enhance social and political cohesion and address environmental problems more directly and effectively. Whether the state-society transformations implied here (e.g. state-rescaling) are narrated as a quasi-Hegelian process of territorial dialectics producing new (multilevel) forms of governance or a quasi-Marxian re-inscription of state-society-capital relations, Europeanisation implies a certain idealism and promise of political and social innovation. In policy terms, this would signify a transcendence of strictly national orientations through construction of a coherent and cohesive political, social and economic space. Within this setting, cross-border co-operation at the interstate, regional and local levels has for several decades provided ideational foundations for a networked Europe based on community-building, common projects and shared concerns.

The question pursued in this essay is the extent to which EGTCs, as expressions of CBC, reflect processes of Europeanisation understood in the broadest sense of the term. This question is not as straightforward as it might seem; understandings of both concepts vary considerably, especially if we introduce a degree of scepticism regarding the normative assumptions that underpin Europeanisation and CBC. For

example, while a certain degree of convergence might be at the heart of the project of European construction, perhaps necessary for the ontological security of the EU as a political community, Europeanisation is itself a highly contested notion – a notion that reflects a variety of empiricist, normative and critical understandings that leave considerable room for interpretation (see Bialasiewicz, 2008; Browning & Joenniemi, 2008; Klinke, 2012). Similarly, interpretations of CBC range from rather positive readings of ‘de-bordering’ (Beck, 2013; Blatter, 2003; de Sousa, 2012), critical assessments of post-political and neo-liberal state-rescaling (Brenner, 2000; Sparke, 2002) and everyday experiments in the solution of social problems (McCall, 2015; Mikhailova, 2018).

There can be no real objection to the empirical definition and measurement of Europeanisation based on a priori defined criteria as long as this is not the only, or even the principal means of understanding the concept. Convergence can be used to measure the relative success of EU conditionality in affecting local change (Glüpker, 2013). Robert Ladrech (2010: 2) has in fact suggested that a major problem related to thinking of the EU in terms of Europeanisation is one of tautology: since this process is often taken for granted, the goal of research becomes an issue of “establishing the causal link, thereby validating the impact of the EU on domestic change.” Nevertheless, the notion of convergence is highly useful as a conceptual tool against which more contextually accurate tests of Europeanisation can be gauged; i.e. as a process defined by local responses to impacts of European integration (Ladrech, 2002). At any rate, it is misleading to infer a causally effective conditionality of EU policies that fails to take into account the more subtle processes of diffusion, cultural filtering and local framing implicit in policy adaptation. Following the observations of Brusis (2005: 301), research perspectives that understand the emergence of political community through compliance with a priori defined criteria “tend to be static and are not systematically interested in the dynamics and interplay of political, institutional and policy changes (...).” In similar terms, Delanty (2016) has argued that top-down perspectives, focusing, for example, on domestic institutionalisations of Europe, overlook the plural nature of the EU and that fact that this plurality does not preclude greater European unity. In sum, therefore, convergence is only one dynamic of European integration and perhaps most visible in the harmonisation of legislative and administrative standards. Such a convergence is much less evident in any sense of common political culture.

Linking CBC to Processes of Europeanisation – Some Observations

The above discussion suggests that more inclusive understandings of Europeanisation are needed – above all when we consider the practical consequences of cross-border cooperation for creating a more unified, coherent political community. However, Europeanisation is certainly more than a process of ‘re-territorialising’ political, social and economic relations. Furthermore, Europeanisation is not about ‘being European’ - this can indeed involve a highly reactionary and particularistic understanding of European identity and a limited threshold for recognising what is and what *can be* European. Inclusive criteria regarding CBC are also helpful; as will be argued here, CBC is more than the fulfilment of formal policy or governance criteria, it is a process of creating new and partly unforeseen possibilities, for example through dialogue, trust-building and mutual learning. It is perhaps unsurprising that CBC has been appropriated by the European Union as a unique social innovation that bolsters its political identity and informs its agenda of promoting social and spatial cohesion. The concept of CBC in the European context is of course not a new one; it began as a number of subnational political projects already in the 1950s between Dutch and German communities. However, the process of ‘widening and deepening’ the European Union has contributed to the elevation of CBC to the paradigmatic status enjoys in EU policy, for example in the guise of the INTERREG programme which has operated for over thirty years. Transcending the barrier function of national borders is thus an element of Europeanisation which, among others, can be understood as a diffusion of supranational notions of governance, citizenship and identity (Scott & Liikanen, 2011). Through its support of CBC, the European Union has promoted a self-image of role model for intercultural dialogue, regional cooperation and local/regional development.

Looking back on the history of cross-border co-operation within the EU, multilevel institutional mechanisms for transboundary co-operation in Europe appear to have contributed significantly to the development of new interregional and transnational working relationships (see Medeiros, 2018). CBC has been part and parcel of reconceptualisations of Europe as a functional space with complex structural, environmental and social interdependencies. Together with other aspects of transnational cooperation, for example in the area of European Spatial Planning, a ‘re-bordering’ of sorts has taken place that directs attention to pan-European and regional urban systems, urban-rural relationships, access to development opportunity structures and a concern for a diverse natural and cultural heritage.

The durability of the Euroregion model, moreover, provides evidence that CBC is taken seriously as a local government remit and status-enhancing vehicle, even without EU project support. These associations are now a ubiquitous feature

along the EU's external borders as well in many non-EU European contexts. The INTERREG structural initiative, which celebrates 30 years of existence in 2020, has disbursed well over 28 Billion Euros for cross-border projects. It is success story in the sense that it has created a tradition as well as a policy area that is dedicated to the idea of mutual benefit through cooperation across national borders. Consequently, CBC and Cohesion Policy are now ideationally and practically linked with increasing policy emphasis on the roles of networked and territorially flexible relationships between stakeholders in local and regional development. The imperative of institutionalisation is largely associated with gradual and complex processes of governance innovation and capacity-building at different levels of public administration and coordination with private and third-sector actors. Thus, as an expression of *formal Europeanisation*, CBC has been frequently understood as a manifestation of a putative and generalised 'multilevel governance' within EU-Europe (Noferini et al., 2020). Within this context, border regions are explicitly understood to be important elements within European integration policies by representing potentially flexible vehicles with which to manage conflict and facilitate collective action in the management of social, economic and environmental issues (Bufon & Markelj, 2010; Perkmann, 2002).

In one way or another, therefore, formal Europeanisation criteria such as institutionalisation have been extensively used because of their verifiability and relative measurability. It was a means of confirming a certain post-Cold War rapprochement, for example, between Germany and Poland, and signified a considerable political commitment to overcoming past differences through creating joint governance structures (see Gorzelak, 2006; Scott, 2000). Institutionalisation was also emphasised as it embodied a commitment to pursue ambitious development aims in terms of a shared European (and not merely national) space. And while most border contexts might not be able to compete with the pathos of German-Polish reconciliation, the momentum of multilevel governance appeared to weave old and new EU member states together within a tapestry made of 'unity within diversity'.

The European promise however is also one of social progress and transformation – and this is indeed its most challenging objective. To an extent, it has achieved this through intercultural dialogue and strategies for reconciling and co-ordinating diverse interests. Europeanisation manifests itself in a linking-up of communities, groups and individuals who in this way develop a shared sense of purpose and much of this takes place at the level of informal everyday interaction. If CBC aims at progressive, ethical and idealistic goals, then critiques of its realisation need to go beyond empiricist criteria. According to Nadalutti (2020), Europeanisation involves the establishment of a greater sense of a political commons across borders, which is an ambitious measure of the capacity of the EU to further a sense of community identity and sense of solidarity. Nadalutti (2018) also suggests that such cooperative

enterprises possess an inherently ethical component and that while CBC fulfils utilitarian criteria of Europeanisation, it remains a largely administrative exercise that has not realised its wider social (and ethical) potential.

Partly as a response to limitations of more formal and normative understandings, borders scholars, especially since the turn of the Millennium, have elaborated highly critical social constructivist understandings of CBC as contested development projects (Bürkner, 2006; Perkmann, 2007; Kolossov & Scott, 2013). Here, it is not so much the process of governance itself that is the subject of study but the seemingly ‘post-political’ nature of CBC and thus its manifestation as a neo-liberal relegation of welfare functions downwards to local actors. These spatial strategies cross-cut traditional nationally-oriented development practice; in effect, nothing less than a (neo-liberal) “EU-Europeanization” of regional and local political spaces is being attempted (see Jensen & Richardson, 2004).

Europeanisation and CBC: A Pragmatic Perspective

While theoretically and normatively led analysis of CBC has no doubt provided insights into Europeanisation processes, it is not difficult to uncover serious deficits. Whatever the comparative merits of different approaches to understanding CBC, definitive appraisals of its impacts and success are difficult to formulate. The criteria that would be needed for such appraisals defy unambiguous and comprehensive definition and the contextual richness of Europe’s diverse cross-border cooperation contexts. One major weakness of both critical and empiricist governance approaches, for example, has been the frequent neglect of conditions of action and the application of largely untested assumptions related to ‘state re-scaling’, ‘bounded rationality’ and similar context-free rationales. From a contemporary standpoint, the actual practice of cooperating across borders casts serious doubt upon the notion that induced, and institutionally ‘thick’ cross-border governance can by itself lead to a transcending of boundaries in policy terms.

Cross-border governance, in Europe or elsewhere, had few precedents when it emerged as a largely informal and advisory policy instrument tool in the late 1980s and it remains a highly experimental form of governance. Perhaps the most rewarding avenue of study is one which interprets CBC from the perspective of pragmatic social science in which learning from experience and bottom-up theorisation guide investigation rather than a priorism (e.g. state re-scaling). Jacobs and Varró (2014) indicate that theoretically driven understandings of what CBC/TC is *supposed* to do, for example with regard to territorial governance, can limit our appreciation of the practical significance of cross-border cooperation. These authors indicate that in the Dutch-German case, cooperation routines have outlived INTERREG support and have gradually instilled a sense of regionness that facilitate

different strategic uses of space. Jacobs and Varró suggest that local and regional actors develop cooperation mechanisms situationally and in ways that reflect both political opportunities and social and structural constraints. Similarly, results gathered within the scope of various research projects appear to highlight the value of open-ended, project-oriented co-operation that is less rule-based.¹ Territorial and cross-border cooperation are processes that ideally should create environments of trust and flexible networks of actors. Almost by definition and despite tangible short-term project results, these require a long timeline in order to provide benefits commensurate with the ambitious goals of European Cohesion.

My suggestion here is that a pragmatist interpretation contributes to a richer picture of CBC as an experimental form of Europeanisation. Pragmatism emphasises the centrality of social practice in addressing problems facing society. Social practice is, furthermore, not merely a group-specific hermeneutics; it is conditioned by influences operating at all levels, inside the community, outside the community, within the region or state and in virtual space. Social practice is, in other words, subject to constraints and empowering forces that, in turn, social practice itself produces, modifies and mediates. As Flyvbjerg notes: the problem in the study of human activity is that every attempt at a context-free definition of an action, that is, a definition based on abstract rules or laws, will not necessarily accord with the pragmatic way in which an action is defined by actors in a concrete social situation. Social scientists do not have a theory (rules and laws) for how the people they study determine what counts as an action, because the determination derives from situationally defined (context dependent) skills, which the theory—by definition—presupposes to be context-independent (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 42). This reading of CBC harks back to Ladrech's understanding of Europeanisation as a bottom-up process of responding to the political agendas and societal challenges that European integration generate.

The Case of EGTCs

The maturation of CBC in the European context is exemplified by a relatively new Cohesion Policy instrument, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), an instrument that provides a public-law basis for cross-border partnerships between local, region and national political entities. Enabled in 2006 through European Union legislation, EGTCs are formal instruments for territorial cooperation that potentially empower cross-border organisations in terms of more

1 Among the projects that can be mentioned are EXLINEA (funded 2003-2005; <http://www.exlinea.comparative-research.net/>), EUDIMENSIONS (funded 2006-2009; <http://www.eu-dimensions.border-research.eu/>) and EUBORDERREGIONS (funded 2011-2015; <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/266920>).

effective decision-making and the consolidation of cooperation budgets across state borders. Unlike Euroregions and similar cross-border associations, EGTCs are legal entities that allow for more effective collaboration by providing financial stability and, theoretically at least, robust commitments of institutional support. At present there are over 70 such organisations operating at multiple levels of public administration and the tendency is toward an increasing number of new EGTCs (CoR, 2020). EGTCs represent in formal terms a major step forward in strengthening CBC within the EU. They also, in formal terms, strengthen processes of Europeanisation to the extent that they are proliferating as instruments of interstate coordination and, perhaps most significantly, provide more concrete foundations for the cross-border coordination and provisions of public goods and services. However, the legal status of EGTCs is also frequently a constraint as all partners must agree on a specific national legislative format and funding management arrangement in order to guarantee legal stability. Thus, the establishment of an EGTC is frequently a time-consuming bureaucratic process.

The variety of initiatives supported under the EGTC umbrella, and financed by EU Territorial Cooperation (INTERREG) and other Cohesion Policy instruments, is in itself impressive and covers areas such as tourism, emergency and disaster preparedness, environmental mitigation measures, renewable energy, education, cultural heritage, economic development, etc. In most cases, the rationale for establishing EGTCs is instrumental and specifically project-based. However, the EGTCs are also used for enhancing the status of existing and long-standing cross-border cooperation such as, for example, the Meuse- Rhine Euregio , the PAMINA cooperation region and the Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict. Indeed, several examples of what can be termed ‘advanced regional platforms’ for cross-border development exist as EGTCs.

One intriguing example is the EGTC Eurocity of Guadiana, founded in 2018, which has provided a more comprehensive framework for pre-existing forms of Portuguese-Spanish cooperation. The Eurocity reflects continuity of previous work with a focus on tourism, gastronomy and other promising areas of economic development. The Eurocity is also based on a commitment to highlight the region’s cultural heritage within a wider and geographically richer (European) context. The central actors of the Eurocity are the Spanish city of Ayamonte and its Portuguese neighbours Vila Real and Castro Marim.² Spanish government agencies are responsible for financial management issues and auditing. In terms of its general remit of promoting cross-border dialogue and communication, the Eurocity’s work parallels and complements that of smaller-scale Euroregions. It also cooperates with Portuguese and Spanish

² See the Facebook page of the EurocityGuadiana 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/Eurociudad-Guadiana>.

regional agencies, civic associations, municipalities outside the Eurocity and other groups in order to develop a broad spectrum of CBC initiatives that include: "... a permanent social, cultural, sports and business exchange that enhances mutual knowledge and fosters closer relations between the territories." (CoR, 2020: 13). This EGTC is in the process of establishing a 'EuroGuadiana2020' initiative with Interreg Spain-Portugal (POCTEP) funding thus boosting its claims to be the "... first permanent cross-border governance laboratory operating in the cross-border regions (Alentejo-Algarve-Andalusia)" (ibid).

There are many other notable EGTC examples that could be named here but for the sake of this discussion it bears mentioning that the EGTC instrument is also used as a 'collaborative learning' platform, for example in grant-seeking and funding applications. The European Campus EGTC (EUCOR), itself a product of decades-long cooperation between institutions of higher learning and research in the trinational (French-German-Swiss) Upper Rhine area, has exploited regional synergies in order to improve funding prospects for joint doctoral programmes.³

Another visionary project that has been floated is the renovation and re-opening of the former Prussian Eastern Railway as an East-West transportation axis linking German and Polish regions and serving the mobility needs of those who travel frequently between them (Ulrich, 2017). In addition, re-opening the line would contribute to economic development along the railway. This initiative adopted the EGTC formula and involves national, regional and municipalities representatives as well as a Polish polytechnic. Here, the idea of founding an EGTC emerged from the bottom-up through the civil society organization interest group Ostbahn e.V. (IGOB), made up of regional project managers, municipalities, counties and with the support of actors from Brussels and scientific expertise from regional scientific institutions. However, the final establishment and deepening of the EGTC have been slowed by hesitant German state authorities.

Assessments of EGTC performance offer thought-provoking critical reflection regarding future potentials of CBC in Europe given the fact that the mere existence of opportunity structures is not enough - there needs to be a will to cooperate and actually use them (Ulrich, 2019). Estelle Evrard and Alice Engl (2019) have scrutinised EGTCs in some detail, indicating that they are highly sophisticated instruments representing a culmination of thirty years of experimentation with various forms of local, regional and transnational forms of CBC and in many ways represent a potentially forceful post-national vehicle for public policy formulation and delivery. However, Evrard and Engl also point to limitations: generally speaking, EGTCs do not fully exploit the opportunities that legal frameworks offer and have remained rather conventional, following a nationally oriented division of labour

3 See the EUCOR Website: <https://www.eucor-uni.org/en/qustec/>

in their day-to-day operations. Moreover, EGTCs often resemble an extension of national regulations across borders than a fully-fledged expression of cooperation. Again, given the multiplicity of national rules that govern CBC, this is perhaps not surprising. As Peter Ulrich (2019: 7) has observed: “The EGTC legislation is a so-called ‘limping regulation’ (hinkende Verordnung) that needs to be transposed into national law. This may lead to asymmetries in cross-border governance, as the territorial organization and hence the implementation, approval and controlling bodies may be allocated to different hierarchical levels in each country.” As Ulrich notes, differences in administrative decentralisation remain significant; German participation is a matter for the states (Bundesländer), while in France and Poland EGTCs need to be agreed to at the national level. Depending on the circumstances, both contexts can either empower or hinder EGTC formalisation.

In reviewing the list of EGTCs visions and strategies it is clear that there are frequent discrepancies between bold and comprehensive visions – this is indeed part of the ‘marketing’ side of CBC – and the results of EGTC cooperation. Of course, in many cases, the EGTCs are simply too new and perhaps inexperienced to provide rapid results. In their analysis of the Eurocity Guadiana, González Gómez, Domínguez-Gómez and Pinto (2019) indicate that while this cooperation is locally anchored with grassroots support, there remains scepticism as to how the EGTC can achieve its goals of sustainability without greater regional and national government involvement. Moreover, it goes without saying that national borders remain highly important conditioners of action, and not only in administrative terms. In one revealing study Sara Svensson and Peter Balogh (2019) elaborate some of the reasons for the persistence of border-related obstacles and suggest that connectivity, communication and language still present important barriers. More significantly, however, Svensson and Balogh offer a sobering message in terms of the overall limitations of the European integration process itself: it is in fact different regulatory regimes between participating states that represent the most persistent challenges to more effective cross-border cooperation.

Two other points bear mentioning as they have wider implications for the overall role of CBC as both reflections and promoters of Europeanisation. On the one hand, the proliferation of EGTCs within the EU is an indication of the longevity and robustness of CBC as a governance tool and a specific ‘EU-European’ strategy of de-bordering. On the other hand, EGTCs have only really flourished in highly networked and polycentric core areas of Europe – areas where economic resources and political clout are commensurate with local capacities to manage complex cross-border programmes and projects. This is perhaps unsurprising as patterns of CBC not only closely reflect capacities to utilise EU opportunity structures but also reflect the EU’s drive for competitive advantage through consolidating metropolitan economies.

Given these considerations and based on more than three decades of experimentation, what can we say about the results of EGTCs, and CBC more broadly? Some very general conclusions are possible:

- 1) Successful CBC requires a sense of local purpose, adequate institutional capacity and an understanding of the border as a resource. If these conditions are not met, co-operation usually reveals itself as perfunctory, unsustainable and largely - and in negative terms – symbolic.
- 2) Co-operation between representatives of public agencies, universities and, to a lesser extent, non-profit organisations has been generally successful in relatively straightforward projects of clear but limited focus in areas such as: environmental protection (creating transboundary natural parks and nature reserves), transportation infrastructure, vocational training, cultural activities, and public agency networking. However, the encouragement of private-sector networking and investment as well as effective transboundary co-ordination of firm-driven development remains elusive.
- 3) There can be no doubt that within EU-linked and funded policy realms multilevel governance reflects processes of Europeanisation. EGTCs and other associations have served as instruments of EU policy in sharing roles (not always as equal partners) with regional and national governments in the channeling of Cohesion funds into border regions.
- 4) However, it is difficult to ascertain a process of convergence to a specific set of arrangements and practices. What we find is a highly heterogeneous mix of cooperation arrangements across territorial levels and of networks involved in many different forms of public sector, civil society and socio-economic activity. In terms of Europeanisation, EGTCs reflect a diverse European landscape of local, regional and national actors involved in cross-border cooperation.
- 5) There remains, unfortunately, a low level of public awareness of CBC and the fact that the EU actively supports local and regional projects across borders. As a result, much of the knowledge generated by CBC activities – and hence the diffusion of a ‘European message’ is often restricted to direct beneficiaries and actors involved.⁴

4 See the 2015 Flash Eurobarometer (422) on Cross Border Cooperation in the EU, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/eurobarometer/422/cbc_coop_summary_en.pdf.

The above considerations reflect the very mixed record of CBC and EGTCs within the EU. Depending on the level of expectations of those reviewing the scene, these results can elicit disappointment, satisfaction, or cautious optimism. It is evident that CBC has rarely produced rapid or spectacular results in terms of economic growth and regional development. Nevertheless, I argue that we can identify a degree of Europeanisation of co-operation contexts as evidenced by the discourses, agendas and practices of cross-border actors who very often legitimise their activities by referring to the wider political, economic and spatial contexts within which their own region must develop (see Medve-Bálint & Svensson, 2013; Perkmann, 2007; Scott, 2018). What we see in operation is pragmatism, rarely have CBC initiatives truly reflected the character of a post-political or neo-liberal governance strategy, particularly since social development is such a central issue. Given the latent fragility of the European idea of open borders it is certainly positive that CBC maintains a positive momentum of de-bordering through common actions and border-spanning practices.

In the most optimistic scenario we might envisage EGTCs as communities of practice (Mercieca, 2017), that is as a community of people and actor groups that have a shared desire to reflect on what they do and improve what they do. Such communities are characterised by a shared domain (i.e. strengthening cross-border cooperation), a community (different people/perspectives that build relationships through regular contact) and a practice (e.g. practitioners in the field that can share stories, resources and expertise). CBC and EGTCs constitute in their own way communities of practice that are largely centred around local experiments in socio-economic, environmental and cultural development. In theoretical and philosophical terms, CBC might contribute to a strengthened sense of shared European interests and in this way contribute to the creation of a local and regional commons, albeit in very targeted areas of action.

Conclusions

EGTCs are an advance in terms of the institutional sophistication of CBC and yet they also reflect the challenges and frustrations that Europeanisation entails. As a final concluding remark, I would suggest that the main contribution to Europeanisation of CBC organisations such as EGTCs is one of promoting mutual learning as part of co-operative initiatives across borders. It is an issue of developing strong partnerships, capacities for action and convincing strategies with which to address specific regional/local economic, environmental, social and institutional problems. While often radically different, various understandings of CBC and its relationship to European integration all reflect partial realities of highly complex situations. They also serve to underscore the challenges that the EU faces in piecing

together a sense of identity and political community. In these times of multiple crisis, populist challenges to pluralist democratic cultures and a sense of European Union malaise, CBC remains a powerful conveyor of the European spirit of open borders and cooperation.

References

- Börzel, T. A. & Risse, T. (2012) From Europeanisation to Diffusion: Introduction, *West European Politics*, 35:1, 1-19.
- Bufon, M. & Markelj, V. (2010) Regional Policies and cross-border Cooperation: New Challenges and New Development Models in Central Europe, *Revista Romana de Geografia Politica*, 12:1, 18-28.
- Beck, J. (2013) Prospects of Cross-Border Cooperation in Europe: Capacity-Building and the Operating Principle of “Horizontal Subsidiarity”, *International Public Administration Review*, 11:1, 7–27.
- Bialasiewicz, L. (2008) The Uncertain State(s) of Europe? *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 15:1, 71–82.
- Blatter, J. (2003) Beyond Hierarchies and Networks: Institutional Logics and Change in Transboundary Spaces, *Governance*, 16:4, 503–26.
- Brenner, N. (2000) Building ‘Euro-Regions’. Locational Politics and the Political Geography of Neoliberalism in Post-unification Germany. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 7:4, 319–45.
- Browning, C.S. & Joenniemi, P. (2008) Geostrategies of the Euro-pean Neighbourhood Policy, *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:3, 519–551.
- Bürkner, H.-J. (2006) Regional development in times of economic crisis and population loss: The case of East Germany’s eastern border region. Scott J.W. (ed.) *EU Enlargement, Region Building and Shifting Borders of Inclusion and Exclusion*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 207-237.
- Brusis, M. (2005) The Instrumental Use of European Union Conditionality: Regionalization in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, *East European Politics & Societies*, 19:2, 291-316.
- Delanty, G. (2016) Multiple Europes, multiple modernities: Conceptualising the plurality of Europe. *Comparative European Politics*, 14:4, 398–416.
- Flockhart, T. (2010) Europeanization or EU-ization? The Transfer of European Norms across Time and Space, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48:9, 787-810.

- Klinke, I. (2012) Postmodern Geopolitics? The European Union Eyes Russia, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64:5, 929-947.
- CoR (2020) *EGTC Monitoring Report 2018-2019*, Committee of the Regions, Brussels, <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/egtc/ressources/Pages/Publications.aspx>
- De Sousa, L. (2012) Understanding European Cross-Border Cooperation: A Framework for Analysis, *Journal of European Integration*, 35:6, 669-687.
- Engl, A. (2016) Bridging Borders through Institution-Building: The EGTC as a Facilitator of Institutional Integration in Cross-Border Regions, *Regional & Federal Studies*, 26:2, 143-169.
- Evrard, E. & Engl, A. (2018) Taking Stock of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC): From Policy Formulation to Policy Implementation. Medeiros, E. (ed.) *European Territorial Cooperation*, Springer, Cham, 209-227.
- Glücker, G. (2013) Effectiveness of EU Conditionality in the Western Balkans: Minority Rights and the Fight Against Corruption in Croatia and Macedonia, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 9:2, 223-241.
- González Gómez, T., Domínguez-Gómez, J.A. & Pinto, H. (2019) Eurocity: From Political Construction to Local Demand... Or Vice-Versa? *Sustainability*, 11:22, 1-17.
- Gorzalak, G. (2006) Normalizing Polish-German Relations: Cross-Border Cooperation in Regional Development. Scott, J. W. (ed.) *EU Enlargement, Region Building and Shifting Borders of Inclusion and Exclusion*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 195-206.
- Jacobs, J. & Varró, K. (2014) Rethinking Cross-Border Euregionalism as Self-Organising System, *Space and Polity*, 18:1, 1-16.
- Jensen, O. & Richardson, T. (2004) *Making European Space. Mobility, Power and Territorial Identity*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Ladrech, R. (2002) Europeanization and Political Parties: Towards a Framework for Analysis, *Party Politics*, 8:4, 389-403.
- Ladrech, R. (2010) *Europeanization and National Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- McCall, C. (2014) *The European Union and Peacebuilding. The Cross-Border Dimension*, Palgrave MacMillan, Houndmills.
- Medeiros, E. (ed.) (2018) *European Territorial Cooperation. Theoretical and Empirical Approaches to the Process and Impacts of Cross-Border and Transnational Cooperation in Europe*. Springer, Cham.

- Medve-Bálint, G. & Svensson, S. (2013) Diversity and Development: Policy Entrepreneurship of Euroregional Initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 28:1, 15-31.
- Mercieca B. (2017) What Is a Community of Practice? McDonald J. & Cater-Steel, A. (eds.) *Communities of Practice*, Springer, Singapore, 3-25.
- Mikhailova, E. (2018) Collaborative Problem-Solving in the Cross-Border Context: Learning from Paired Local Communities along the Russian Border, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 33:3, 445-464.
- MOT (2017). *Working Group on Innovative Solutions to Cross-border Obstacles*, Main Report, Mission opérationnelle transfrontalière, Paris. http://www.espaces-transfrontaliers.org/fileadmin/user_upload/REPORT_20170628_WG_on_Innovative_Solutions_to_Cross-Border_Obstacles.pdf
- Nadalutti, E. (2015) *The Effects of Europeanization on the Integration Process in the Upper Adriatic Region*, Springer, Dordrecht.
- Nadalutti, E. (2017) Is Cross-Border Cooperation Underpinned by an Ethical Code of Values? A Theoretical Analysis, *Regional & Federal Studies*, 27:1, 41-62.
- Nadalutti, E. (2020) Can Cross-Border Cooperation Boost Cross-border Ethical Governance? *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, doi: 10.1111/jcms.13043
- Noferini, A., Berzi, M., Camonita, F. & Durà, A. (2020) Cross-Border Cooperation in the EU: Euroregions amid Multilevel Governance and Re-territorialization, *European Planning Studies*, 28:1, 35-56.
- Perkmann, M. (2007) Policy Entrepreneurship and Multilevel Governance: A Comparative Study of European Cross-Border Regions, *Environment and Planning C*, 25:6, 861-879.
- Perkmann, M. (2002) *The Rise of the Euroregion. A Bird's Eye Perspective on European Cross-border Co-operation*, published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University (www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology).
- Scott, J. W. (2000) Transboundary cooperation on Germany's Borders: Strategic regionalism through multilevel governance, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 15:1, 143-167.
- Scott, J. W. (2015) Bordering, border politics and cross-border cooperation in Europe. Celata, F., & R. Coletti (eds.) *Neighbourhood policy and the construction of the European external borders*, Springer, Cham, 27-44, http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-18452-4_2.

- Scott, J. W. & I. Liikanen (2010) Civil Society and the 'Neighbourhood' — Europeanization through Cross-Border Cooperation?, *Journal of European Integration*, 32:5, 423-438, doi: 10.1080/07036337.2010.498628
- Schimmelfennig, F. & Sedelmeier, U. (2004) Governance by Conditionality: EU Rule Transfer to the Candidate Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11:4, 661-679.
- Simionescu, M. (2014) Testing the Convergence Hypothesis in the European Union, *Global Economic Observer*, 2:1, 222-229.
- Sparke, M. (2002) Between Post-colonialism and Cross-border Regionalism, *Space and Polity*, 6:2, 203-213.
- Svensson, S. & P. Balogh (2018) Limits to Integration: Persisting Border Obstacles in the EU. Medeiros, E. (ed.) *European Territorial Cooperation*, Springer, Cham, 115-134.
- Ulrich, P. (2017) Grenzüberschreitende funktionale Kooperation im deutsch-polnischen Grenzraum am Beispiel des TransOderana EVTZ – Akteure, Strategien und Institutionen.
- Krzymuski, M., Kubicki, P. & Ulrich, P. (eds.) *Der Europäische Verbund für territoriale Zusammenarbeit. Instrument der grenzübergreifenden Zusammenarbeit nationaler öffentlicher Einrichtungen in der Europäischen Union*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 369–416.
- Ulrich, P. (2019) Territorial Cooperation, Supraregionalist Institution-Building and National Boundaries: The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) at the Eastern and Western German Borders, *European Planning Studies*, 28:1, 57-80, doi: 10.1080/09654313.2019.1623974.