

Languages, Identities and Cooperation in Cross-border Regions.

An Introduction

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Abstract

This introductory paper presents a special issue devoted to the analysis of contemporary cross-border dynamics in Europe in relation to language, culture and identity. The special issue examines cross-border territories from an interdisciplinary perspective and is structured around three interconnected dimensions: language and linguistic diversity; culture, heritage and territorial identity; and governance, cooperation and citizen participation. These dimensions are conceived as interrelated processes that shape how borders are experienced, negotiated and transformed. The paper first examines linguistic diversity as both a potential barrier to and a resource for cross-border interaction. It considers multilingualism, language contact and language education as key factors in developing cross-border relations and advancing European integration. It then explores culture and heritage as socially constructed resources that can reinforce territorial differentiation but can also contribute to the construction of shared narratives and identities across national borders. Particular attention is given to the multi-scalar nature of territorial identities and to the coexistence of local, regional, national, cross-border and European forms of belonging. Finally, it examines cross-border governance as a framework for coordinating institutions, social actors and actors operating at different territorial levels in contexts characterised by functional interdependence and persistent institutional fragmentation. Citizen participation, intercultural exchange and institutional cooperation are regarded as essential for strengthening cross-border governance and reshaping traditional practices of bordering. The contributions included in the special issue illustrate these processes through a range of European and international case studies, highlighting the potential of cross-border cooperation to foster new forms of territorial integration, social interaction and shared governance.

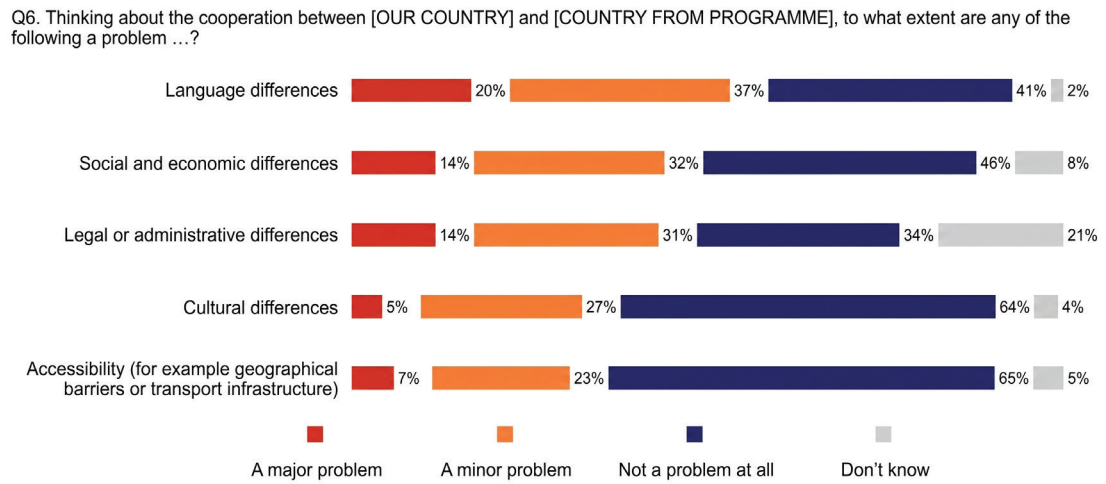
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Introduction

While state borders have historically been designed to separate and to unify towards the centre of states, cross-border regions reveal a paradox: they are spaces in which linguistic diversity and hybrid identities challenge the monolingual and monocultural logic of the nation-state. Political borders are clearly marked on maps, but they rarely coincide with linguistic, cultural or identity borders, which are much more diffuse and often overlap. Furthermore, most cross-border territories “have maintained socio-cultural ties, originating from the need of people living next to the border to preserve the cultural spaces of their origin” (Bufon, 2004, 236). Therefore, the fact that many citizens in cross-border areas (which account for 40% of European territory and one-third of the population) have linguistic, historical and cultural ties with their neighbours should be seen as an asset in the process of European integration. This highlights the need for European citizens, especially those living in these areas, to be able to communicate in several languages. For this reason, Beacco (2005, 15) states that “[p]lurilingualism has been identified as a way of life in Europe.”

Nevertheless, the reality is more complex. For example, according to several studies (e.g. Eurobarometer 422), more than half of Europeans perceive linguistic differences as an obstacle to cross-border cooperation, and one-third perceive cultural differences in the same way; half also identify social, economic, legal or administrative factors as obstacles (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Main problems related to cross-border cooperation.



Source: Eurobarometer 422, p. 112, edited.

Therefore, it is necessary to develop strategies to overcome these obstacles, by analysing successes and failures in cross-border initiatives and recognising the key role of culture, language and identity in fostering mutual understanding. The ultimate goal is greater European integration that gives substance to the European Union’s motto, “United in

Diversity,” adopted in 2000, which, according to the European Commission, “[i]t signifies how Europeans have come together, in the form of the EU, to work for peace and prosperity, while at the same time being enriched by the continent’s many different cultures, traditions and languages.” However, managing multilingualism and multiculturalism is not straightforward. For example, regarding multilingualism, Nelde (2000, 442) states that “[s]ymmetric multilingualism and the often sought equality of existing language remain a metaphysical desideratum: they just do not exist. European multilingualism is asymmetric by definition, never free of conflicts.”

Thus, three key elements emerge in the process of European integration: 1) languages, multilingualism and education; 2) culture, heritage and identity; and 3) governance and cross-border cooperation. These elements were precisely at the core of the Conference “Beyond Borders: Culture, Language and Identity in European Integration”, held in Girona in October 2025 and organised by the University of Girona and the Transfrontier Euro-Institut Network (TEIN), with the support of the Borders in Globalization–21st Century project and the Across alliance of European universities. This special issue brings together a selection of the most significant contributions to the conference.

Languages, multilingualism and education

Cross-border regions can be viewed as genuine sociolinguistic laboratories, as they exhibit social dynamics that differ from those found in other parts of the states (Raasch, 2002, 9). In this context, awareness of the role and function of languages takes on particular significance.

Education—especially education for plurilingualism, which, as we have seen, can help overcome one of the main obstacles citizens face when cooperating—is one of the key elements in the process of European integration. Overall, Europeans hold favourable attitudes towards languages and multilingualism. For example, the 2023 Eurobarometer 540 survey shows that 86% of European citizens agree that everyone should be able to speak at least one language other than their mother tongue, while 69% believe that people should learn more than one additional language. To achieve this, 76% of European citizens support making the learning of additional languages a political priority. Similarly, with regard to “regional” and minority languages, a large majority (84%) believe that they should be protected.

Nevertheless, there is a significant bias in European language policy regarding which forms of diversity are promoted and protected. Across the 27 Member States of the European Union (EU), around 80 native languages coexist, of which only 24 have official status within the EU institutions. The remaining languages are subject to linguistic minorisation and coexist with the dominant language or languages under conditions of diglossia. Furthermore, it is also important to consider the hundreds of non-native languages brought by immigrants over recent decades which, although not traditionally associated with Europe, are also used by EU citizens in a variety of contexts. In spite of

the fact that the EU officially promotes linguistic diversity (Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union and Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights), in practice, it leaves the management of linguistic diversity to the Member States.

Projects aimed at fostering plurilingualism among European citizens are therefore a central element of European policy. The European institutions advocate that all Europeans should be able to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue. The best way to achieve this objective would be to introduce children to learning two foreign languages from an early age. Available scientific evidence indicates that this approach can accelerate language learning while also contributing to improving competence in the mother tongue. Beyond formal education, citizens living in cross-border regions encounter everyday situations that promote plurilingual practices to a greater extent than those found in other areas. These citizens primarily adopt one or many of these three different strategies (Wurm et al., 1996): the first is learning the language of the neighbouring country (Bufe, 2001), not as a foreign language, but through a more communicative approach and by taking advantage of opportunities for everyday learning. For example, through contact with speakers of the other language at work, at sporting or cultural events, while shopping, etc. The second strategy is the use of a third language (usually English) as a *lingua franca*. Finally, the third strategy is the use of a *contact language*, which is a language used only for basic communication and contains elements of the interlocutors' languages and is complemented by non-verbal communication.

Linguistic diversity can make a significant contribution to the development of a shared European identity, understood not as a homogeneous identity that would replace national identities, but as a plurilingual and plural identity that transcends the traditional conception of identity linked exclusively to the nation-state. In this regard, recognising and valuing the different languages spoken in Europe can foster a conception of European citizenship based on diversity, coexistence and the ability to engage with different linguistic and cultural communities.

Language contact, especially visible in cross-border regions, provides a particularly valuable setting in which to observe this reality. The coexistence of different languages can give rise to tensions, inequalities or conflicts stemming from power relations between linguistic communities. However, this contact can also create opportunities for cooperation, exchange and the development of plurilingual practices. Border areas should therefore not be conceived solely as spaces separating languages and communities, but also as spaces for encounter, negotiation and the development of new forms of linguistic interaction and identity construction.

In this process, it is essential to give citizens and local associations an active role. Language policies are not implemented solely through institutions and public authorities, but also take shape in the social spaces where people actually use languages. As Spolsky (2004) points out, speech communities—such as families, friendship groups, clubs, associations, educational institutions and workplaces—constitute the social contexts in

which language policies are interpreted, negotiated and implemented. For this reason, any policy aimed at promoting plurilingualism and cross-border cooperation should directly engage these actors and strengthen their capacity to influence policy and decision-making.

Thus, the promotion of European plurilingualism should not be limited to the formal learning of several languages, but should also include the active participation of linguistic communities in creating spaces for coexistence and cooperation. This perspective allows us to understand linguistic diversity not only as a feature of European society, but also as a social, cultural and political resource for developing a more inclusive European identity that is less constrained by state borders.

In this area, the special issue comprises four papers. Maja Melinc Mlekuž, from the University of Nova Gorica, provides a synthesis of four previous studies (case studies, documentary analysis and qualitative research) on language and literacy competence in schools where Slovene is the language of instruction in Italy. She argues that the presence of the language in the school context is not sufficient, but that “[l]anguage competence without sufficient opportunities for use may remain school-based knowledge; literary competence without a developed linguistic and textual basis may slip into the reproduction of information.” In the field of language teaching, the paper by Snizhana Holyk and Lesya Rohach (Uzhhorod National University, Ukraine) explores the theoretical foundations and pedagogical applications of translanguaging in plurilingual and cross-border educational contexts. The research focuses on the multilingual and cross-border region of Zakarpattia in Ukraine. The study investigates the effectiveness of pedagogically structured translanguaging strategies in university foreign language classrooms. The study concludes that the use of translanguaging, when integrated into teaching practice in a planned and structured way, can serve as an effective pedagogical resource in university classrooms characterised by plurilingualism.

Furthermore, Margot Bonnaïfous (ITEM) presents a cross-border experience based on the tandem programme *Language Courses Applied to Professional Practice*. She argues that tandem courses enhance the linguistic and intercultural competences of professionals involved in cross-border cooperation. Finally, Barbara Alicja Jańczak (Institute of Applied Linguistics, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań) focuses on the Polish-German border and argues that border regions function as linguistic laboratories where new communicative practices emerge, drawing on an analysis of the *linguistic borderscape*. The paper presents the Border Integration Model, which draws on insights from sociology and border studies to analyse the linguistic dynamics characteristic of these territories. The model makes it possible to examine how these dynamics vary according to the degree of durability, permeability and hybridity characterising the different border regions.

Culture, heritage and identity

Linguistic domains and major language-family groups are the result of long-term historical processes and reflect the distribution of cultures, broadly understood as the set of practices, values, knowledge, languages and symbolic expressions that societies have

developed over time and that have shaped the way societies relate to the world. In this regard, Europe is not culturally homogeneous, but neither is it made up of completely separate cultures. European cultures have followed different historical trajectories, are expressed through different languages and are associated with different religious and social traditions, but have also been historically interconnected through migration, trade, conflict, exchange and processes of mutual influence. European cultures are therefore both distinct and interconnected.

Culture, however, is interpreted and reinterpreted by societies, political institutions and, especially, states to construct their own narratives and make sense of their distinctive characteristics. The conception and construction of heritage provide an example of this. Heritage, that is, the set of tangible and intangible elements (objects, expressions, knowledge and landscapes) that a society recognises and chooses to preserve and pass on to future generations, consists of elements that have been selected, valued and institutionalised as representative of a community or territory. Heritage is therefore not an objective, immutable reality inherited from the past, but rather a social construction involving processes of selection, interpretation and transmission.

In cross-border regions, this dimension is particularly relevant, as certain landscapes, languages, cultural practices, memories, historical routes and heritage elements may be shared by communities on both sides of the border. Heritage can thus act as a marker of differentiation, while also providing a resource for generating shared narratives, strengthening ties between territories and fostering cross-border cooperation.

The interpretation of heritage, culture and language to construct narratives about what “we are” or who “we are” leads us to the concept of territorial identity. Just as culture and language undergo long-term processes of formation and consolidation, territorial identity is a more malleable social phenomenon that develops over a shorter timescale, shaped by social and relational processes linked to the experiences, memories and sense of belonging of individuals and groups. Various authors have examined how territorial identities are formed, from national identities (Anderson, 1983; Nogué, 1991) to identities in the context of globalisation (Castells, 1997). In border and cross-border regional contexts, identity, like the identities discussed above, is neither a fixed nor an inherent feature of the territory, but rather a dynamic process that develops through institutionalisation and through the interaction of material, cultural, linguistic, political and symbolic elements.

These elements contribute to what Paasi (2009) terms the identity of a region, that is, the set of characteristics that distinguish one region from another and that are invoked in political, cultural or place-marketing discourses. In cross-border areas, this territorial identity often incorporates shared references that transcend the state border, such as a shared historical heritage, common ecosystems, or well-established economic and cultural ties.

However, Paasi distinguishes this identity from people’s regional identity, or regional consciousness. The latter refers to the degree to which individuals identify with a given territory and is clearly multiscalar in nature. At the same time, individuals may feel a

sense of belonging to their municipality, county, cross-border region or state, or even to supranational spaces. In border regions, this multiscalar sense of belonging is particularly relevant, as the border does not necessarily constrain processes of identification, but can instead become a space for everyday interaction, mobility and cooperation that fosters the development of shared identities (Newman, 2006).

Territorial identities are constructed through narratives that establish symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them”. Although these narratives can reinforce differentiation between territories, in cross-border regions they can also foster the emergence of shared identities based on shared experiences, everyday interactions and cooperation. The construction of these identities depends to a large extent on the actions of institutions such as public administrations, the education system, the media and cooperation bodies, which produce and disseminate narratives about the territory. These narratives also reflect power relations and can be promoted by both institutions and civil society.

In this process, state borders have played a particularly important role in shaping modern identities. The consolidation of nation-states has contributed to linking territory, population and national identity, thereby reinforcing the notion that political borders coincide with culturally homogeneous communities. However, this correspondence is often more a political and symbolic construction than a territorial reality. Collective identities can cross state borders, overlap with or compete with national identities. In this regard, Anderson (1983) showed that nations are imagined communities, constructed through social, political and cultural processes.

Cross-border identity, on the other hand, does not necessarily imply the existence of a common, homogeneous identity on both sides of the border. In this context, it can be understood as the result of a series of practices and relationships that link politically differentiated territories (Sohn, 2014). In border regions, there is thus a persistent tension between identities, which can either reinforce division or foster cohesion. This tension is particularly relevant in the context of cross-border cooperation, as the policies and institutions that promote territorial integration do not operate in a neutral space, but rather in areas characterised by diverse memories, perceptions and senses of belonging. In this sense, identity can constitute both a resource for building a cross-border community and a factor of resistance or differentiation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analysing forms of cross-border governance, as cooperation policies can only become firmly established if they take into account the complexity of existing identities and the different territorial scales at which people experience belonging.

Within this interpretive framework, which views culture and heritage as socially constructed realities, and from a multiscalar perspective on territorial identity, three papers address these issues from different perspectives. The first paper, by Michael Frey and Rahel Alia Müller of the University of Applied Sciences Kehl, focuses on borderwalks as practices for exploring and experiencing border spaces, and shows how moving through and directly experiencing the territory can help to make visible the cultural, heritage and

identity elements that connect or differentiate the communities on either side of the border. The paper thus highlights the potential of these practices to foster new ways of perceiving and engaging with cross-border spaces.

The second paper, by Pedro Albuquerque, who has conducted research at universities in both Spain and Portugal, focuses on the relationship between history, archaeology and cultural heritage in border areas, through the case of the Spanish-Portuguese border in the Lower Guadiana river. The paper shows how the material traces of the border — fortifications, former control points, routes, landscapes and archaeological sites— constitute a form of heritage through which historical relations can be reinterpreted between communities on either side of the border. This heritage encompasses experiences of both conflict and separation and practices of exchange, mobility and mutual cooperation that have developed over time. In this regard, the paper presents border heritage as a resource for reconstructing shared memories and narratives and, at the same time, for fostering new forms of cooperation and territorial development. The Lower Guadiana case thus illustrates how reinterpreting the past can contribute to transforming former borders of separation into spaces of connection and integration.

A third paper also incorporates the European dimension, understood not as an identity that replaces national or territorial identities, but as a form of belonging that can overlap with and interact with them. The study by Noriko Suzuki, a researcher in the Department of Social Sciences at Waseda University, Japan, examines, through the case of British citizens residing in France after Brexit, the relationship between European identity, citizenship, and experiences of mobility and residence within the European space. The paper shows that European identity does not necessarily constitute an alternative national identity, but can coexist with other forms of belonging and can be constructed through everyday practices, rights, mobility trajectories and institutional ties.

This contribution thus complements the approaches to identity developed above in border and cross-border spaces by showing that territorial identities are articulated simultaneously across different scales and that cross-border experiences can contribute to generating forms of belonging that transcend the framework of the nation-state. Taken together, the three papers show, from different perspectives, that culture, heritage and identity are not static features of border territories, but rather dimensions that are constructed through social practices, interpretations of the past and interactions between communities. This perspective allows us to understand cross-border spaces not only as spaces where different languages, cultures and identities converge, but also as spaces where these can be reinterpreted and give rise to new forms of territorial belonging and connection. In this regard, the cultural and identity dimension also provides an important basis for understanding the forms of cooperation and governance that develop along Europe's borders.

Governance and cross-border cooperation

A final concept underpinning this special issue is governance, which is addressed here because of its practical, applied dimension in addressing border-related issues, including those of a cultural, linguistic and identity-related nature. At the same time, cultural, linguistic and identity-related characteristics can strongly influence governance practices, as they constitute contextual factors that shape the technical, institutional and political dimensions of governance. Governance can be understood broadly, from mechanisms for coordination and concertation between governments and public administrations to practices of cooperation, coordination and citizen participation. In this sense, the concept of governance allows us to move beyond a conception of government based solely on public institutions and the state's hierarchical structures, by incorporating interactions among public, private and civil society actors, as well as relationships across different territorial levels (Governa, 2002). In border areas, this perspective is particularly relevant because state borders divide spaces that may, from a functional perspective, constitute highly interdependent territories and give rise to multiple functional mismatches.

Cross-border governance can therefore be understood as the set of mechanisms, institutions and practices used by actors on either side of a border to address challenges and seize opportunities that extend beyond state administrative boundaries. This cooperation also takes place across multiple levels, that is, by bringing together different scales (local, regional, national and supranational) that interact with and influence one another (Scott, 2015). It does not imply the disappearance of borders or the replacement of state structures by a single cross-border authority. Rather, it is a process of coordination between institutional systems that remain distinct, through mechanisms ranging from bilateral agreements and permanent cooperation arrangements to more flexible networks and ad hoc projects.

More specifically, a distinction can be made between cross-border cooperation and cross-border governance. The former refers to specific projects, agreements or initiatives between actors in neighbouring territories; the latter has a broader scope and refers to the stable or emerging arrangements through which these actors articulate interests, make decisions, manage resources and build shared capacities. Governance therefore involves not only cooperation but also the establishment of mechanisms for coordination, representation, decision-making and accountability. This distinction allows cross-border cooperation to be understood as a potential instrument within broader processes of institutional capacity-building and territorial integration. Euroregions, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), and other cross-border structures are examples of the institutionalisation of cross-border governance. However, governance is not limited to these formal structures but also relies on cross-border cooperation and on networks of public, private and civil society actors, operating both formally and informally, to build trust and capacity for joint action. Cross-border governance is therefore both institutional and relational, combining formal structures with informal networks and practices.

This perspective allows us to move beyond a strictly institutional conception of cross-border cooperation and incorporate its social and civic dimension. Borders are not managed solely by governments; they are also experienced and transformed by individuals, businesses, associations, civil society organisations and other territorial actors. Cross-border governance involves both the establishment of stable institutional mechanisms and the creation of spaces for participation and engagement that enable local actors to participate in shaping strategies and policies affecting border territories. As Scott (2015) explains, cross-border cooperation can thus contribute to transforming bordering practices and reconfiguring traditional forms of territoriality associated with the border.

Finally, cross-border governance is directly related to the cultural and identity dimensions discussed above. Forms of belonging, representations of territory, shared memories and existing social relations can facilitate or hinder cooperation. Therefore, developing cross-border governance capacity requires not only legal and institutional instruments, but also trust, mutual recognition and the ability to reconcile divergent interests. In this sense, governance can be understood as a process of territorial construction, in which institutional cooperation and stakeholder participation gradually contribute to creating new spaces for interaction and, potentially, new forms of cross-border integration.

Within this framework, the papers in this section explore different dimensions of cross-border governance in greater depth and highlight its complexity. The contributions address diverse territorial scales and contexts, but share the view that cross-border cooperation cannot be understood solely in terms of institutional agreements, but rather as a process involving actors, practices, knowledge and relational capacities developed across territories.

The first paper, by Jean Peyrony, Rami Nasrallah, Michael Turner and Martina Benedetti Marshall, researchers involved in the Anthedon and the Vision of Hope report initiative, explores the potential of cross-border cooperation and multilevel governance as tools for reconstruction, integration and peacebuilding. Drawing on the European experience, particularly the processes of integration and cooperation that took place after the Second World War, the study considers the possibility of applying some of these lessons to the context of Gaza, Israel and the neighbouring territories.

The proposal is structured around six dimensions of cross-border integration — economic, functional, institutional, informational, socio-cultural and interpersonal — and emphasises that territorial cooperation cannot be limited to relations between governments, but requires different levels of governance and the involvement of communities, institutions and other territorial actors. The paper thus demonstrates how cross-border cooperation can contribute not only to resolving shared practical problems, but also to building trust, strengthening social ties and gradually transforming relations between territories.

The second paper, by Sarah Herrmann and Michael Frey, researchers at the University of Applied Sciences Kehl, examines citizen participation in cross-border spaces through a proposal for a digital participation platform for the Upper Rhine region. The authors begin by noting that, despite the territory's high level of functional integration,

political participation mechanisms remain largely confined to national frameworks. The paper analyses the possibilities and requirements for developing a cross-border citizen participation infrastructure that goes beyond mere information provision or consultation and facilitates more meaningful forms of deliberation. It particularly highlights the need for participation mechanisms to accommodate the linguistic, institutional and legal diversity characteristic of border regions. In this regard, the authors advocate combining formal and informal mechanisms, digital and in-person formats, and forms of participation with a genuine capacity to influence decision-making.

Finally, the third paper is authored by several researchers from three universities in three different countries (Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium), all involved in the Greater Region: Beate Caesar, Tom Becker, Leah Honecker, Karina Pallagst, Jonas Pauly and Hélène Rouchet. The study examines cross-border cooperation from the perspective of different planning cultures and paradigms that shape territorial development processes. Based on an intercultural planning game developed in the Greater Region, involving French, Walloon, German and Luxembourgish participants, the paper analyses how these different planning cultures shape ways of reasoning, negotiating and making decisions in cross-border contexts. The study shows that cross-border cooperation does not depend solely on institutional frameworks, but also on the capacity of actors to understand and negotiate different ways of understanding territorial planning. The paper thus highlights the importance of intercultural exchange and fostering mutual understanding as key conditions for strengthening cross-border cooperation and governance, while also demonstrating the potential of participatory and experimental methodologies to foster shared learning among actors in border territories.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate that European borders cannot be understood solely as lines of political separation, but rather as complex spaces of contact, negotiation and territorial construction. Languages, cultures, heritage and identities are key dimensions for understanding how these borders are experienced and interpreted, while cross-border cooperation and governance provide mechanisms for managing interdependencies and transforming relations between neighbouring territories. Recognising the cultural diversity and richness found in border regions and cross-border areas should be regarded as both a defining feature and a resource for European integration. It is also important to recognise their complexity, as well as the constant changes and reconfigurations that these areas undergo through practices of cooperation, participation and, ultimately, identification. The papers brought together in this special issue, drawing on a variety of perspectives and contexts, show that cross-border spaces constitute genuine territorial laboratories where new forms of belonging, interaction and governance are negotiated, and where cultural, linguistic and institutional differences can become both obstacles and resources for building more integrated European spaces.

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