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Beyond Borders:
Culture, Language, and Identity
in European Integration

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Beyond Borders:

Culture, Language, and Identity in European Integration

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Welcoming Address

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On behalf of the Transfrontier Euro-Institut Network (TEIN), it is my great pleasure to welcome readers to this special issue of the ABCD Journal dedicated to the TEIN Annual Conference 2025: **‘Beyond Borders: Culture, Language and Identity in European Integration’**.

Following the last issue of the ABCD Journal on **‘What future for the concept of Borderless Europe?’**, this new edition consolidates the collaboration between TEIN and the ABCD Journal. TEIN’s mission is the same as the ABCD’s: to unite theory and practice, and, through this, to influence policy-making in the European Union.

We are particularly pleased to foster this partnership through a collection of contributions that so closely reflect the interests of our communities. European integration and cross-border cooperation, of course, as well as the many ways in which culture, language and identity shape our understanding of borders, borderlands and Europe itself.

TEIN brings together universities, research institutes and training centres that are dedicated to the practice of cross-border cooperation in Europe. TEIN’s objective is to build capacity in cross-border contexts to strengthen European integration. TEIN’s annual conferences are one of the initiatives designed to achieve this aim.

Borders are too often understood as lines on a map but we should be aware that they are also, first and foremost, living spaces. In an increasingly interconnected world, the overlap of identities, languages, and other cultural elements represents both a challenge and an opportunity for cross-border territories and European integration. These elements can serve as bridges that unite citizens of different countries, but they can also become excuses for communities to turn their backs on each other. Understanding phenomena such as interculturality, multilingualism and multiple identities is therefore crucial to the process of European integration. Currently, more than half of Europeans (according to Eurobarometer 422) consider linguistic differences to be problematic for cross-border cooperation, and one third believe that cultural differences are problematic. Similarly, around half of Europeans believe that social, economic, legal or administrative differences pose an obstacle to cooperation. Cross-border regions provide a unique perspective from which to explore this reality. These regions are places of innovation where different identities and languages coexist, where institutional boundaries meet everyday practices and where the meaning of belonging is continually negotiated.

In this respect, the 2025 TEIN annual conference, organised with the support of the Borders in Globalization 21st century borders project¹ offered a particularly timely opportunity to collectively reflect on the following aspects:

- How broad cultural expressions can foster mutual understanding and cooperation between neighbouring regions.
- Success (and failure) stories where culture has been a driving force for cross-border cooperation.
- How different identities can enrich cooperation initiatives.
- Strategies to promote, question, hybridise, and preserve cultural and linguistic identities in border regions and throughout Europe.
- The role of languages as a vehicle for communication and cultural exchange.
- The role of shared cultural heritage.
- Educational programs that promote multilingualism, intercultural understanding, and cross-border cultural exchange.
- How local, regional, and national identities can coexist with a broader European identity.

The conference brought together scholars, practitioners, students and representatives of cross-border institutions to examine these dynamics from different and complementary perspectives and we are delighted that this special issue provides a space in which some of these reflections can reach a wider audience.

We hope that the contributions will encourage further debate about the relationship between borders, culture, language, and identity, while also inspiring new forms of cooperation across Europe.

We extend our warmest thanks to all conference participants, contributors, organisers, partners, and colleagues whose commitment made the 2025 TEIN Annual Conference possible. We are equally grateful to the editors of the *ABCD Journal* for their openness to this collaboration and for providing this valuable opportunity to preserve and disseminate the ideas generated through our collective exchange.

As Europe continues to navigate political, social, cultural, and linguistic complexity, the task of going “beyond borders” remains both challenging and essential. It calls for institutions that cooperate, communities that engage with one another, and individuals who are willing to see difference not as an obstacle, but as a resource.

We invite you, the readers of this special issue, to join us in that endeavour—and we look forward to continuing this dialogue together.

1 <https://www.biglobalization.ca/>

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.

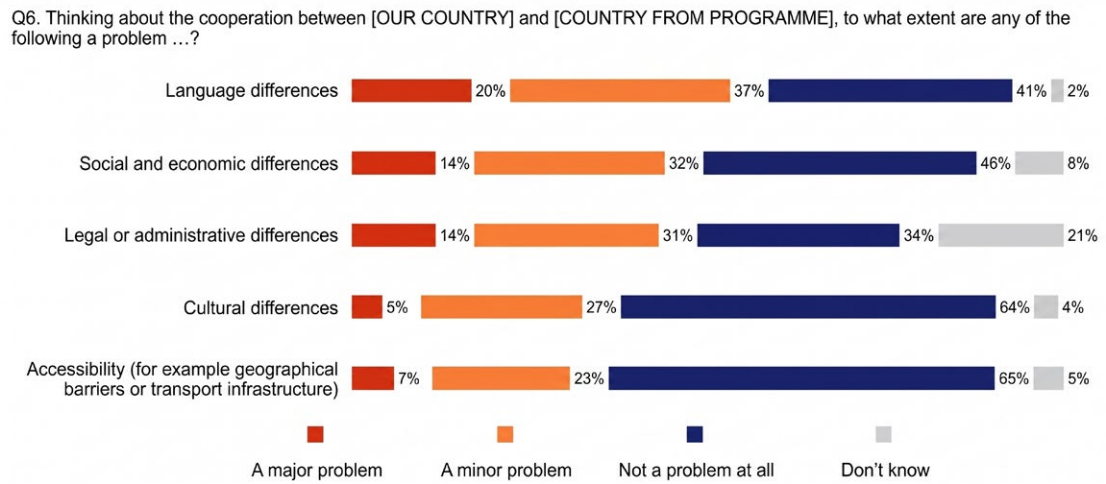
Keywords: Cross-Border Regions, Linguistic Diversity, Cultural Heritage, Territorial Identity, Cross-Border Governance; European Integration

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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Planning Cultural Exchange Across Borders

First Steps Towards a Common Comprehension of Planning Paradigms in the Greater Region?

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Abstract

Cross-border spatial development poses distinct challenges where differing planning cultures and paradigms meet at national borders, a reality that is particularly evident in the Greater Region. We present an innovative, intercultural planning game developed by the UniGR-CBS Spatial Planning Working Group, which serves as a science-policy interface with a dual purpose: it functions as a data collection methodology drawing on discourse analysis of stakeholder reasoning, and as a training format for spatial planners in cross-border contexts. The results highlight planning cultural differences and similarities as expressed by French, Walloon, German and Luxembourgish participants. These observations are followed by a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the planning game methodology, considering both its capacity to generate evidence on planning paradigms and its potential as a continuing professional development tool. Together, these two dimensions point toward the broader argument that sustained intercultural exchange and mutual understanding are not only academically valuable but politically necessary especially when the foundation of cross-border cooperation in spatial planning is being challenged.

Keywords: Intercultural Training, Cross-Border Spatial Development, Cooperation, Planning Games, Planning Cultures, Planning Paradigms, Greater Region

Relevance and special features of cross-border spatial development, planning cultures and other challenges for functional border areas

Various development trends and crises—such as demographic change and the growing threats posed by climate change—increasingly challenge the spatial development of regions and the provision of equal living conditions. Ensuring the provision of basic public services while adapting spatial structures to new needs in a resilient manner is becoming an urgent issue. It is therefore increasingly important for local and regional authorities to engage in cooperation beyond administrative boundaries in terms of information - international exchange of planning strategies and practices fosters knowledge transfer and critical reflection on domestic practices (Pallagst, 2018) - but also in concrete material exchange. Particularly, rural areas located at the national peripheries might benefit from the complementary provision of services of general interest, such as health care and education (Caesar et al. 2025). At the same time, the Schengen freedoms have enabled decision-makers, investors and border residents to pragmatically exploit border differentials, i.e. regional disparities, such as socio-economic imbalances, between neighbouring European border regions (cf. Braunerhielm et al. 2019; Terlouw, 2012). This has created strong functional interdependencies with visible spatial effects such as the designation of new settlement areas, fuel stations and shopping centres at the border. Another prominent indicator of cross-border interdependencies is strong commuter flows across the border because of an attractive labour market on one side, which leads to a functional polarisation of the border regions (Decoville & Durand, 2017). Additionally, disparities can increase competition between neighbouring regions (cf. Ricq, 2006).

Spatial planners are professionally trained for mitigating and averting conflicts of interests and land-uses (cf. Decoville & Durand, 2021) and could play a key role when it comes to steering cross-border development. However, they often lack specific cross-border training. Spatial planning traditionally stops at the national administrative borders because its scope of action and the related competences are legally bound to a nation state's boundaries. In most countries, cross-border spatial planning is not a priority in planners' day-to-day business and is merely an additional task. The legal tie of spatial planning to a nation goes hand in hand with a certain national *“way in which a society possesses institutionalised or shared planning practices. It refers to the interpretation of planning tasks, the way of recognising and addressing problems, the handling and use of certain rules, procedures and instruments, or ways and methods of public participation. It emerges as the result of the accumulated attitudes, values, rules, standards and beliefs shared by the group of people involved”* (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009, p. 43) – which is described by the concept of planning culture.

Planning culture directly influences planning practice and thus the actual planning processes (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009) as well as planning education. Thus, the country-specific planning context is often the *“basis for [...] the training of new planners”* (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2015, p. 2137f.). It comprises i.a. planning principles, paradigms, core planning missions, habits and traditions (Pallagst, 2024; cf. Caesar & Evrard, 2020) which *“are learnt by those directly involved, usually recognised consciously, and are sometimes explicitly*

articulated in the planning process” (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2015, p. 2137f.) - but are not self-evident for planners from other planning contexts. Thus, it is very likely that cooperation challenges arise when two or more planning cultures come together in cross-border planning processes (cf. Caesar & Evrard, 2020). The strong national influence on spatial planners is further reinforced by the requirement to represent the interests of the society (cf. Turowski, 2005) while managing complex land-use conflicts. In a cross-border planning context, planners’ national interests may conflict with the interests of the cross-border area and complicate the development of a sound cross-border development strategy for the common good: they need to think ‘outside the box’, and take into account existing cross-border interdependencies that constitute the cross-border region (Decoville & Durand, 2021). Besides, linguistic barriers, different competences, stakeholders to be involved as well as increased bureaucratic efforts hamper cross-border cooperation (Cerić, 2023; Jacobs, 2016). Therefore, planning processes are more time- and resource-consuming than within a purely national context (Nienaber, 2018).

Because of these cultural cooperation differences, we argue that there is an increasing need to empower and train planners from neighbouring countries. So far, there is a lack of methodological teaching approaches in the education and training of spatial planners located in cross-border regions to differentiate and reflect about the planning cultural subtleties of their neighbouring countries. To complement the traditionally national focus of planning (cultural) education and training in border regions, we propose to facilitate a cross-border exchange and interaction process of planning students and practitioners, i.e. colleagues from neighbouring countries. Through joint reflections about their planning (practices) planners can better understand how cultural contexts shape planning behaviour and develop a better intercultural understanding as common ground for further cooperation (cf. Durand & Decoville, 2018). Pallagst et al. (2021) further emphasise that learning through exchange fosters reflexivity: planners and students become aware of their own cultural biases and develop the ability to critically assess their own systems. This experiential learning helps future planners grasp the cultural dimensions of planning beyond theoretical knowledge. Literature by Pallagst (2020) emphasises how such interactions enable mutual learning in cross-border contexts. We expect that the exchange across borders helps to better coordinate the spatial development in cross-border areas with strong functional interdependencies and to mitigate contradicting spatial planning developments and conflicts in the long run.

Combining the educative approach with a research interest in planning cultures: development of a methodology for intercultural training and data collection

The Routledge Companion to Comparative International Planning highlights the range of motivations which might underlie comparative planning efforts – from knowledge exchange, e.g. in the cross-border context, to theory building (Babalik, Frank & Sykes, 2026). Besides our goal of empowering spatial planners from neighbouring countries to

plan across borders, we want to gather evidence about the influence of planning cultures on cross-border spatial planning as well as planning cultural differences and similarities within the Greater Region. Why this also requires an intercultural exchange is explained in the following.

Over the past 20 years, interest in international exchange in spatial planning has grown significantly (Reimer, 2017). Since the 1990s, efforts like the EU Compendium (EC, 1997) and typologies by Newman & Thornley (2005) or Farinós Dasí et al. (2007) have classified systems by legal, administrative, and economic traits, highlighting European commonalities and differences. Comparative research since the 1990s has shown that purely descriptive or structural comparisons are insufficient to capture these embedded cultural dimensions. According to Stead (2026), comparative planning research often relies on variables such as legal frameworks, administrative structures, and policy instruments, and due to its complexity requires thorough guidance taking into consideration time and choice of cases which might lead to different results. While these approaches helped identify formal similarities and differences, they tended to simplify planning practices and overlook the cultural logics behind them (Pallagst, 2018). Also, Babalik, Frank & Sykes (2026) emphasise that planning systems cannot be fully understood outside their cultural and institutional contexts. To address these shortcomings, the concept of planning culture was introduced. It operates on multiple levels, from societal norms to professional practices, and is often implicit, making it difficult to (a) anticipate for planning practitioners from other countries, and to (b) analyse through conventional comparative methods – yet planning culture has a significant influence on practice (Caesar & Evrard, 2020).

International comparative research identified planning paradigms that are shared among countries. They either have a normative character such as the 15-Minute City (cf. Khavarian-Garmsir, Sharifi & Sadeghi, 2023; Moreno et al. 2021), indicating planning objectives, or describe planning procedures, i.e. guide the organisation of planning processes (cf. Albrechts 2006; Hein, 2017). To ensure relevancy of planning in the face of transformations in society, paradigms change from time to time (Khavarian-Garmsir, Sharif & Sadeghi, 2023; Chandy, 2023). While certainly common paradigm trends exist among countries, there are also distinct differences in the way in which paradigm implementation occurs, influenced by specific structures, legalities and planning cultures (Albrechts, 2006; Hein, 2017). A practice-oriented cultural analysis of planning paradigms is necessary to understand how they manifest in everyday procedures, actor constellations, and modes of participation (Hein, 2017). Understanding the influence of planning paradigms must go beyond pure policy analysis and involve the study of actual practices. Planning paradigms are deeply embedded in planning cultures. This is demonstrated by Knieling & Othengrafen's 'Culturized planning model' (2009). In this model, three layers of planning cultures are suggested, which are societal environment, planning environment, and planning artefacts. The layer 'planning environment' represents the shared assumptions, values and beliefs of planning professionals. Subsequently, planning paradigms, although not explicitly discussed, are closely related to this layer of planning

cultures. In their empirical research on planning cultures, Pallagst et al. (2021) for instance identified the ‘compact city’, which is an important planning paradigm, as a common factor in the Japanese, German and US planning cultures.

Caesar & Evrard (2020) recommend examining and comparing the implicit elements of planning cultures in neighbouring countries, to learn more about the specific challenges of cross-border spatial planning. Empirical analysis of planning cultures is difficult and challenging, given the long-standing lack of suitable tools for analysing planning cultures and cross-border spatial planning (Reimer, 2017). A focussed intercultural exchange with and among planning professionals seems essential (cf. Knieling & Othengrafen 2015) to meaningfully study planning cultural differences, because planning systems are deeply embedded in socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts. It facilitates practical knowledge transfer beyond theoretical analyses, addressing the complexities of diverse national systems. Such a reflexive learning is crucial for meaningful comparison, as it shifts the focus from static system typologies to dynamic, practice-oriented understanding. It thus allows to uncover implicit assumptions and taken-for-granted planning cultural practices that would otherwise remain invisible (Pallagst, 2018).

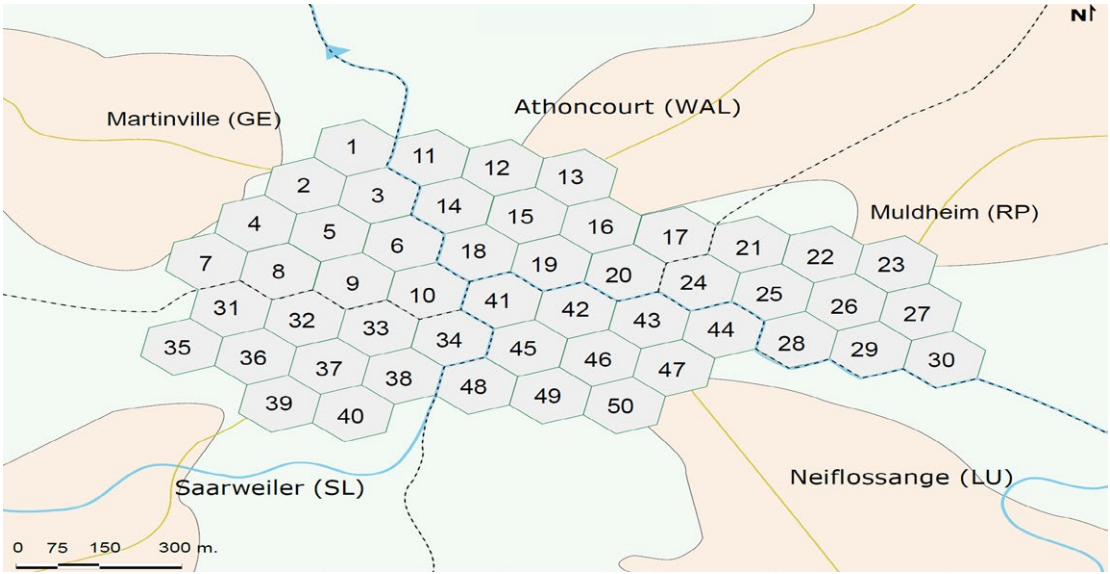
As mentioned above, practice orientation both in terms of exchange with professionals and observation of their planning behaviour is key to produce evidence on planning cultural implicit differences. There are numerous approaches to engaging with planning practice, ranging from living labs and planning games to focus groups and other participatory formats. Each of these methods offers distinct advantages in terms of interaction, observation, and knowledge generation. In our research, we chose the planning game method, as it enables an in-depth discourse among participants while remaining embedded in a structured yet interactive and game-based setting. This combination allows for both reflective discussion and the observation of situated decision-making processes, thereby providing valuable insights into planning practices.

The ‘planning game’ method does not directly refer to spatial planning but has been applied in multiple fields. It is a “*method belonging to the category of simulation games and can be used in different contexts [...] such as education, professional training and research*” (Rouchet, 2025, p. 65) with particular characteristics. First, it simulates real-life, dynamic, and complex situations by representing institutional or administrative systems within dynamic models. To manage the inherent complexity, the approach is based on three design principles: reduction (retaining only pivotal elements), abstraction (representing elements with less detail than reality), and symbolisation (transforming reality into game components such as rules and scenarios). This allows for the faithful simulation of real professional structures and processes. Second, teamwork and collaborative processes constitute an intrinsic and fundamental pillar of the method. Participants are divided into teams representing various stakeholders and must work together to achieve common goals. This interactive framework fosters the development of both individual and collective skills, particularly in communication, negotiation, and group responsibility. Third, the methodology relies on dynamic processes involving actions, decision-making, and their consequences. As a

strictly action-oriented method, it requires participants to make concrete decisions whose effects are then tested and verified within the model. The situation evolves in real time based on these choices, allowing the participants to experience moments of conflict, negotiation, and strategic development as they would in a professional setting. Unlike many other games, the planning game relies on an open scenario where results cannot be defined in advance. There is no single ‘correct’ or reproducible solution; instead, the outcome is a unique product of the specific strategies and interactions adopted by the teams. In this context, success is defined as finding a positive solution to an initial problem rather than defeating an opponent. Finally, the method provides an opportunity to test different strategies and learn through trial and error. It creates a safe learning environment where errors do not have permanent real-world consequences. This absence of ‘real impacts’ allows participants to test various strategies and optimise their decision-making processes before they are eventually transferred to an actual professional context (Rouchet, 2025).

Our intercultural planning game invites planning practitioners, planning students and local politicians from the different parts of the Greater Region, i.e. the Grand Est in France, Luxembourg, Wallonia in Belgium, and Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany, to collaboratively engage in a fictional but close to reality cross-border planning process scenario, including national, bilateral and multilateral negotiation phases, and to develop a joint cross-border planning concept as final output. Participants engage as (future) planning practitioners respectively as politicians from their respective regions, i.e. roles that they also play in real life. Each regional team ideally consists of two practitioners, three students and one local politician.

Figure 1: Game board of the planning game



Source: UniGR-CBS Working Group Spatial Planning, 2022.

In the planning game, participants are confronted with a fictional cross-border planning scenario with a fictional geographical setting: The planning area, a brownfield and former industrial site, spans across the territories of one Luxembourgish, one French, one Belgian and two German municipalities and covers 75 hectares. Some border municipalities are separated by a river, the settlement areas of two municipalities have grown together (see fig. 1).

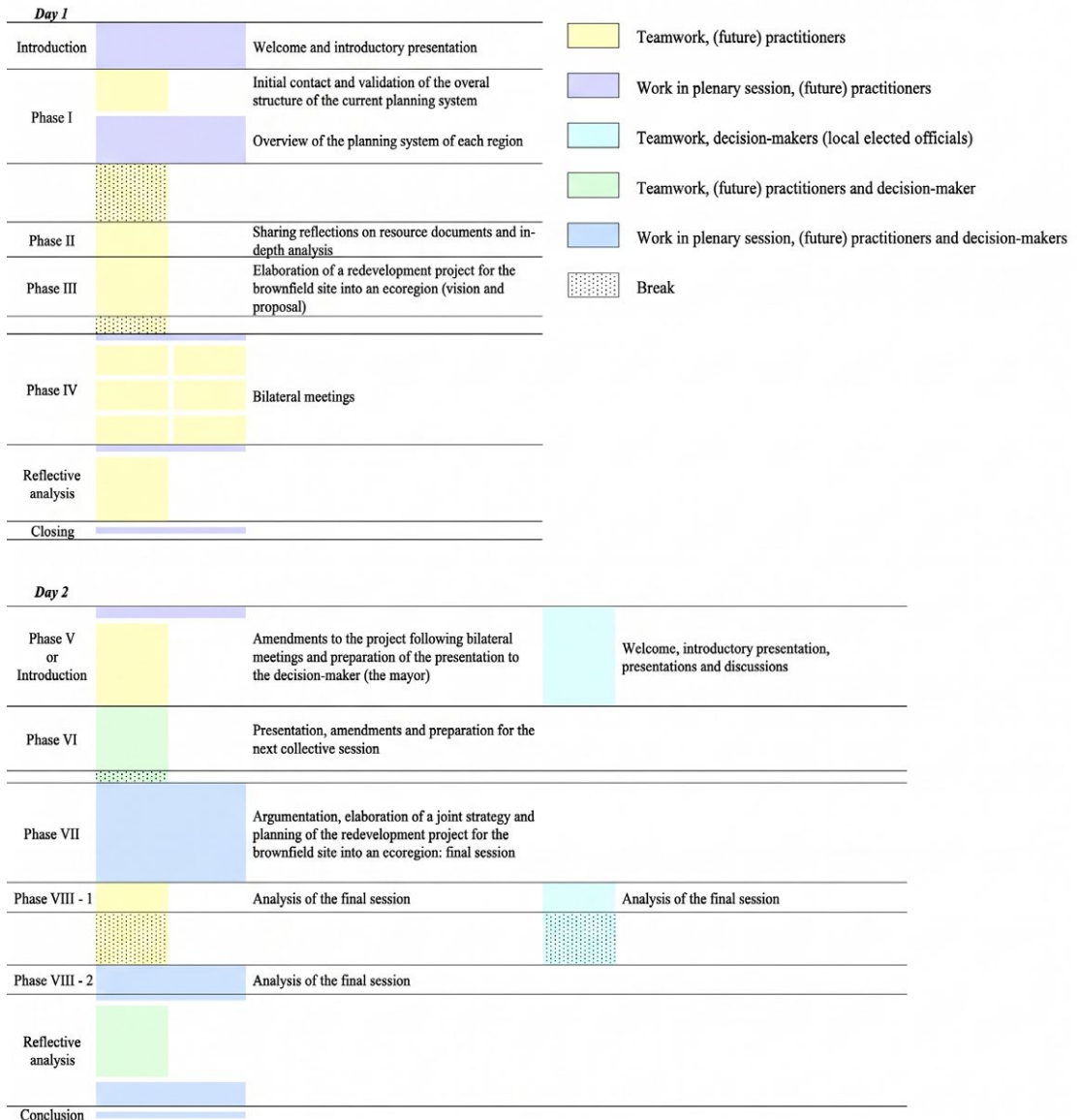
During the game, the teams are asked to develop a land-use concept with the objective to revitalise and develop the brownfield site to an 'Eco Region' with a joint 'ecologically just future'. Fourteen different types of land-use tokens are predefined, their number being limited. Tokens comprise special land-uses such as a city centre, a shopping mall, an educational hub, three different forms of renewable energies (wind, solar and hydroelectric power) as well as office districts, commercial and industrial areas, residential and mixed-use areas, and four different types of green spaces. The tokens have to be situated on the fifty empty hexagons in the planning area (see fig. 1) according to some predefined rules. The final allocation, however, depends on the team's choice. We inserted some highly conflictual land-uses to provoke discussions. Besides that, the scenario defines fictional information on the five municipalities and their surrounding regions' territorial characteristics as well as broad regional planning objectives¹ which helps participants and regional teams to develop their planning concept. Municipal territorial characteristics differ; defined needs purposely create some tensions about jobs or residential areas to stipulate active negotiations between the regional teams.

The planning game can be conducted on-site or online² and lasts approx. 14 hours. It consists of eight phases and two reflection phases that are described below (see fig. 2). Some phases take place in the plenary, others in regional or bilateral settings thereby providing a clear representation of the complexity of real-world spatial planning processes, which are similarly shaped by the interplay of different people, functions and interests. All of them are moderated by the researchers in a way that the planning processes and results are influenced as little as possible. Phase I is an ice-breaking activity for the regional teams and dedicated to a discussion on the cross-border region's inherent planning systems and their presentation in the plenary. Participants develop a common understanding of their own planning systems in regional groups and inform participants from other countries about their system. The phase sets the ground for the intercultural exchange, informs participants about neighbouring countries facilitates first individual reflection processes and illuminates first planning cultural differences.

1 The regional characteristics and individual regional planning objectives are based on the real-life municipalities and regional planning documents from the four different countries of the Greater Region.

2 In February 2022, it was conducted as a two-day online event because of COVID but was originally planned and designed as a two-day on-site event.

Figure 2: Planning game phases and distribution of collaborative work



Source: Rouchet, 2025.

The simulation starts in phase II, where regional teams familiarise themselves with the scenario, the game descriptions and regional needs before they develop their planning concept in phase III. The latter entails the creation of an individual vision and planning principles for the planning area and the allocation of the land-uses on the cross-border territory. At the end, teams choose their two favourite negotiation partners for the subsequent fourth phase. Phase IV is dedicated to three rounds of two parallel bilateral discussions, each between two regional teams. Additional teams were allowed as listeners. Each regional team presents its concept, followed by a bilateral discussion or negotiation.

Each region is represented in at least two bilateral rounds of negotiations. A reflection phase follows this intensive exchange. Participants individually complete a questionnaire about the previous phases of the intercultural training. Afterwards the results are discussed within the regional groups. This reflection phase allows participants to step back from the simulation and highlight the parallels with real-life planning situations, as well as the learnings achieved. The next day starts with phase V, where the regional groups get the opportunity to adjust their original land-use allocations and concepts based on the findings of the previous bilateral negotiations. In parallel, the local politicians join the planning game, and moderators brief them about the planning game's progress before they meet their regional teams. In group phase VI, the regional teams present and discuss their planning concepts with their politicians. All participants meet in the plenary phase VII. Here, each team's politician presents their regional cross-border concepts, before all participants jointly negotiate a common one.

In phase VIII-1, participants reflect in two groups (politicians / practitioners & students) on the cross-border process. Learnings, insights and findings are exchanged in the plenary in phase VIII-2. This is followed by an individual reflection questionnaire, posing similar questions as on the first day to step back from the simulation game and to request if the completion of the planning game has changed the participants' attitudes and highlighting the parallels with real life. The exchange is facilitated by simultaneous interpretation that helps overcome linguistic barriers. Overall, participants benefit from the intercultural and professional training with stakeholders from the neighbouring countries because they practice communication, mitigation and coordination of spatial development ideas and consensus-building while exchanging different planning approaches (cf. Rouchet, 2025).

During the game, researchers document the regional teams' course of action. Through videorecording of all interaction processes and transcriptions, gameplay observations and reflection rounds, they gain insights into participants' practical reasoning and interactions as well as underlying thoughts. Based on this, we trace subtle planning cultural differences that formal comparisons often overlook. Thereby, we want to learn more about inherent cross-border regional' planning cultures, their differences and similarities and how the planning cultures influence cross-border spatial planning processes. The next chapter presents findings from our planning game conducted in 2022.

Traces of planning cultural evidence from the Greater Region - comparing the interpretation of planning paradigms across borders

In this analysis we focus on planning paradigms as elements of planning culture. We illustrate which key paradigms help to describe teams' deliberate course of action in national and cross-border exchange processes and show which were applied to explain participants' planning choices. We then compare the subtle differences underlying regional comprehensions across the French, Walloon, Luxembourgish and two German teams.

Methodology of the analysis of interactions

A discourse analysis of the participants’ discussions during the planning game is used to study participants’ expression of planning rationalities, negotiations, and multiple paradigmatic orientations through talk. Furthermore, the planning processes were traced. This was done to identify implicit assumptions, power relations, and communicative routines in social interaction. A deductive coding approach was used, drawing on seven planning paradigms from previous research in advanced planning theory (see fig. 3). Deductive coding allows for systematic theory-led analysis regarding emergent themes in the data (Saldaña, 2021).

Figure 3: The seven planning paradigms considered in this study

Paradigm	Category	Explanation	References
Integrative strategic planning	Process	A goal-oriented approach, that coordinates multiple sectors, actors and spatial scales, bridging strategic thinking with spatial action	Albrechts, 2006
Just planning		A normative framework that centres equity, social justice and the fair distribution of benefits and burdens in the design and outcomes of planning processes	Fainstein, 2010
Communicative planning		An approach grounded in deliberative discourse, emphasising consensus-building through inclusive dialogue among diverse stakeholders rather than top-down experts	Healey, 1997; Innes, 1995
Incremental planning		A pragmatic, incremental mode of decision-making that advances policy through small, adjustable changes rather than comprehensive rational plans	Lindblom, 1959
Resilient planning	Content	A planning orientation that prepares territories and communities to absorb, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses such as floods or climate change	Davoudi et al. 2012
Health-oriented planning		An approach that proposes physical and mental well-being as a primary planning objective, shaping land use, mobility and green space decisions	Barton & Grant, 2006
Sustainable planning		A framework that integrates environmental protection, economic viability and social equity to meet present development needs without compromising future generations	Brundtland, 1987

Source: Own illustration, 2026.

For each of the seven planning paradigms, we developed a set of keywords and analytical indicators derived from the paradigm definitions established in the literature (see. fig.3). These indicators guided the coding of the transcripts of the teams’ discussions, negotiations and reflection rounds. They were applied both to the procedural dimension of the teams’ interaction processes (for example how planning tasks were organised and negotiated) and to the content of their planning concepts (e.g. objectives, patterns and land-use justifications), in line with the two categories distinguished in fig. 3. While this deductive coding scheme provided a theory-led starting point, we refined it inductively in a second coding cycle. In this way we unravelled patterns that the initial indicators could not capture, and we revealed unexpected combinations, and interactions between paradigmatic orientations, for instance where teams blended different paradigms in a single justification.

The additional codes were used to refine and extent the original framework. This iterative procedure allowed us to remain sensitive to the specific ways in which planning paradigms were mobilised in a cross-border, multilingual and multicultural setting.

In our analysis we present national differences and similarities in terms of the different planning concepts developed within regional teams and focus on the reasoning and prioritisation of objectives within national and multilateral interactions. It distinguishes two categories (see fig. 3). First, we characterise the process of planning concept development to classify the participants' course of action and compare regional team's internal processes with cross-border development processes in accordance with the simulation game phases to learn more about the particularities of the cross-border spatial planning context. Second, we analyse the reasoning of participants in terms of content (i.e. which objectives and arguments are pronounced while designing the planning concept). When analysing the participants' arguments and their references to important planning paradigms, it must be considered that the game materials influenced the game participants in terms of their approach (e.g. flood protection, sustainability goals, green spaces, etc.). Therefore, we compare the interpretation and prioritisation of these game rules.

National and cross-border processes of concept development: integrative strategic planning, just planning, communicative or incremental planning?

As mentioned above, the game distinguishes purely regional, group-internal phases, the bilateral negotiation phases and the joint approach in the final cross-border development concept. This allows us to draw conclusions about the differences between national and cross-border planning practice. When analysing the teams' procedures in the development process of the planning concept, various planning paradigms could be observed.

When analysing regional approaches, we discovered references to integrative strategic planning, i.e. the teams' decisions relied on an underlying strategy which coordinated different objectives comprehensively. The two German teams defined comprehensive strategies. Other teams took a small-scale approach and directly discussed favoured combinations of land-use, such as green axes, or stated that combinations of certain land-uses were taboo, e.g. due to harmful emissions (see below). Additionally, all teams started their concept strategically with allocating the 'centre' in the planning area. Some regions adopted a polycentric logic (evenly distributed development to enhance resilience and balanced growth), while others chose to work with a mono-centric logic (strong urban core). This created conflicts among regions and required negotiating shared visions. Other key strategic decisions taken by the teams at an early stage were the allocation and choice of public service facilities such as energy plants, and two land-uses that were only available once, such as the shopping mall and the Ecolab. Three teams explicitly referred to existing land-use structures in the immediate vicinity (as described in the game documents) in their planning process and justified some land-use locations with the proximity of existing land-uses or infrastructures. Rhineland-Palatinate, for example, wanted to designate residential

areas near already existing ones, while France and Belgium decided to locate new residential and mixed-use areas (FR) respectively industrial areas (BE) near existing road axes (see below).

Despite the border context and the partly competing development needs of the sub-regions, as specified by the game materials, the French, Rhineland-Palatinate and Luxembourgish teams explicitly demonstrated their willingness to distribute land uses fairly, with the aim of achieving a more balanced development in the cross-border region, justifying many of their land-use allocations with specificities of their neighbouring regions. The Luxembourgish team, for example, placed the commercial area in the French municipality with a low employment rate. The Rhineland-Palatinate team allocated an industrial area in Saarland and the Ecolab in France, because they were affected by structural change. This points to the ‘just planning’ paradigm in the sense of distributional fairness. The Belgian team argued for polycentric development with the objective of dispersing the functions in a just manner. During the actual joint cross-border negotiation process for the joint concept, the Rhineland-Palatinate team became disappointed with their expectations of just distribution. They were given the floor very late in the negotiation process and tried (desperately) to allocate the shopping mall in Rhineland-Palatinate, but this was rejected by the other regions due to the risk of flooding.

The cross-border, multilateral game phases were particularly shaped by communicative and incremental planning approaches. Cross-border planning was seen as a communicative planning exercise rather than a technical one with predefined procedures. This is due to the clash of different planning cultures and their underlying systems, which are not coordinated with each other. The procedures needed to be negotiated first before the content was addressed. In our planning game, discussions were used to build a shared understanding and resolve conflicts. Participants valued the fact that the planning exercise was based on dialogue, consensus-building and fairness. They agreed on a common concept which reflected diverse interests and perspectives: every party was invited to make proposals that were negotiated and agreed on based on consensus. It points towards the fact that (a) communicative planning ideals are deeply rooted in all regions, and (b) governance capacities and trust are deemed important. Despite differences in governance culture and spatial disagreements, the process was consensus rather than conflict driven. The former was key for cross-border spatial planning.

Throughout the cross-border planning process, it became clear that adaptive or step-by-step decision-making was crucial. Adjustments were negotiated iteratively and collaboratively rather than being imposed by participants or planning paradigms. This finding reflects insights from the incremental planning paradigm (planning as gradual, adaptive, and pragmatic). Even though it shows the importance of flexibility and responsiveness of stakeholder concerns, this led to a somewhat more fragmented common long-term strategic vision than the regional visions originally presented by the

teams. Concepts were adjusted due to new information and reasoning of the different teams. Professional and political negotiations were crucial for assessing the feasibility of adaptations implementing this planning design.

Importance of resilient, health-oriented, and sustainable planning

In this section we analyse the participants' references to the international planning paradigms 'resilient', 'health-oriented' and 'sustainable' planning. The discussions and negotiations focused on locations and of certain land uses. To better compare the differences and similarities in the teams' arguments, we first examine specific locations and then certain land uses and describe participants' reference to the paradigms. All three were addressed by the different teams' conceptualisations. They interpreted them similarly, but the implementation and prioritisation varied among the teams as can be seen in the following.

Figure 4: Special locations of the planning area

Location	Planning principle	RLP (DE)	SL (DE)	WAL (BE)	LUX	GE (FR)	Paradigm
River	Risk prevention	Green spaces only (retention & maintaining landscape)	Green spaces only (retention), industrial areas possible with building rules	No residential	Green spaces only (retention), 'Centre' not in flood risk area	Flood protection relevant	Resilient planning
Transport axes	Accessibility			Industrial areas		residential and mixed-use areas	Sustainable planning
	Quality of life (emissions)		no residential areas directly at main roads		No residential-only		Health-oriented planning
Centre	Compact city	'Centre' & education, parks, central functions	'Centre', education, parks, offices, mixed-use	network of activities: 'Centre', offices, mall, education	'Centre' & mall (local amenities), inner city revitalisation with dense housing, education, offices	'Centre', education & mixed-use; mall (despite flood risk),	Sustainable planning
	Quality of life (emissions)		mixed-use only			mixed-use	Health-oriented planning

Source: Own depiction, 2026.

The teams identified plots near the river, plots along existing transport axes, and centrally located plots as special locations within the planning area (see fig. 4). The centre of the development area is bisected by two border rivers. The game scenario describes water bodies as a connecting element, although there is a risk of flooding, particularly in the French and the two German region. The teams restricted land-uses near rivers as a

flood prevention measure and referred to the paradigm of resilient planning. The German, Belgian and Luxembourg teams considered the risk of flooding to be a clear exclusion criterion for built-up areas and allocated green spaces in the immediate vicinity of rivers as potential retention areas. Wallonia excluded residential use. For the French team, flood protection was relevant, but not at the forefront of their considerations.

The map of the planning game entails a few bigger roads which ensure the villages' accessibility. The Walloon team considered them to be relevant for the allocation of industrial areas to ensure a good accessibility. France located residential and mixed-use areas along the road network to increase their accessibility and mobility (both refer to sustainable planning) and articulated no concerns about potential emissions. In contrast, due to expected high noise emissions, the Saarland and Luxembourgish team excluded areas for purely residential purposes on main access roads (health oriented planning) which conflicts with the French approach.

The centrally located plots are often situated directly at the regional borders and near the river, leading to conflicting objectives. Game materials encouraged teams to allocate complementary land uses on both sides of the (mostly centrally located) border rivers. Furthermore, participants need to allocate the special land use 'centre' which is open for further interpretation on the map. All teams favoured a compact, mixed urban structure with short distances (sustainable planning). To this end, all teams located the 'centre' function centrally and usually in a key location (four-country border, river crossing) as a social, identity-forming meeting place with appeal for the entire region. In accordance with the compact city concept, the 'centre' was combined with other central uses. Groups shared broad agreement that mall, education and office space should be combined with the centre. The German groups envisaged to allocate public spaces such as parks nearby. Despite general agreement, approaches varied: Wallonia, France and partially RLP distributed these central land-uses in a fair, and partially polycentric manner to increase regional accessibility and provision of services (BE) or form thematic clusters (FR), whereas Saarland and particularly Luxembourg followed the goal of a joint central concept based on industrial and office clusters with concentrated mixed-use areas around the 'centre' and decentralised housing in combination with leisure facilities. Due to potential noise emissions, France and Saarland agreed on restricting the centre for residential-only areas.

The allocation of industrial areas, energy plants and the shopping mall was often discussed controversially (see fig. 5). Some uses were deliberately placed on the periphery. When dealing with the allocation of industrial areas, but also (wind) energy plants the teams very often referred to their noise or CO₂-emitting character as challenge. This refers to the paradigm of health-oriented planning. To minimise the impact on people, residential areas were not located in the immediate vicinity of these uses (Saarland) but were often interspersed with mixed-use areas (FR & RLP) or allocated in the peripheries (Saarland & France). All teams but Wallonia envisaged the combination of energy and industrial or commercial areas - both were emission intense and needed a safe energy

provision (resilient planning). While Luxembourg initially planned to locate wind energy in peripheral areas of the planning area, and France interspersed with meadows, Saarland excluded the allocation of wind energy plants from the very start because the formal distance requirements specified in German planning law could not be met. For the French team, it was important to allocate industrial facilities only on the periphery due to their emissions. Saarland and Luxembourg team members argued similarly. The Luxembourg team considered it possible to combine industrial areas with office or mixed-use areas. The emissions of the industrial land-uses were less articulated in the Walloon team's discussions. Instead, it put its emphasis on their good accessibility. Regarding energy plants, both Rhineland-Palatinate and Luxembourg participants stated to follow a decentralised and diverse approach, as they had opted for an energy mix of the three available types. This points to the principle of crisis resistance and thus increased resilience, but also to the paradigm of sustainable planning. The requirement to locate a shopping mall (large-scale commercial premises) within the planning area was the subject of heated debates, particularly in Saarland, where it was declared inadmissible and ultimately located in France because the concept might still work there, while other groups interpreted this function more flexibly as commercial premises and assigned it to a central area to avoid long distances (sustainable planning).

Figure 5: Conflicting land uses identified during the planning game

Land-use	Planning principle	RLP (DE)	SL (DE)	WAL (BE)	LUX	GE (FR)	Paradigm
Industrial areas	Infrastructure provision	combined with solar energy	combined with energy production		combined with energy production	combined with energy production	Resilient planning
	Minimise emissions effects on people		in periphery	not too close to residential		in periphery	Health-oriented planning
		combined with mixed-use areas as buffer to residential areas			combined with mixed-use areas or offices	combined with mixed-use areas as buffer to residential areas	
Wind energy		mixed-use areas as buffer to residential areas, at the periphery only	Excluded (planning law), instead water & solar energy with less effects		in periphery only	meadows as buffer zones	
Energy	Risk prevention	decentralised energy mix		water & wind energy	decentralised energy mix		Resilient & sustainable planning
Shopping centre	Provision with local amenities	central, highly accessible, allocated in biggest village, provides local amenities	outdated concept, local amenities in polycentral mixed-use areas	central	central, provides local amenities and specific goods for development area (short distances)	central	Sustainable planning

Source: Own depiction, 2026.

The planning game differentiates six residential-only and ten residential areas with mixed uses (e.g. shops or offices). The regional teams pursued different approaches regarding the location of areas for purely residential purposes. Rhineland-Palatinate and Wallonia proposed an even distribution of residential areas across the city. All teams favoured a location with a high quality of life for its residents. Luxembourg located these areas in the centre to revitalise the latter and reduce the distances to services or recreation areas, while Saarland restricted residential-only areas in the centre due to expected noise emissions (see fig. 4). Generally, mixed-use areas were often located between residential only areas and industrial areas as a buffer for the emissions (see fig. 5) because they were less sensitive to noise. The Saarland team argued that areas for purely residential purposes should not be located on main access roads for the same reason. This all refers to the health-oriented planning paradigm. In contrast, the French team favoured the residential premises to be equipped with a high accessibility in the vicinity of main access roads (sustainable planning; see fig. 5).

The planning game differentiates four different green space categories (forests, public parks, urban gardening, meadows & pastures) that should not be located entirely at the riverside and defines the development of a green axis as an objective.

Figure 6: Planning principles in relation to green spaces mentioned in the planning game

Planning principle	RLP (DE)	SL (DE)	WAL (BE)	LUX	GE (FR)	Paradigm
Quality of life & high accessibility	Grouped at the river and next to residential areas (meadows, parks) for local recreation (green axis)					Health-oriented & sustainable planning
Cross-border link			green link connecting 'centre' with sub regions			Sustainable planning
Prevent urban sprawl	revitalisation of attractive landscape at the rivers	arrondation, maintain ecological attractiveness		high housing density next to green recreation areas	prevent urban sprawl	
Green buffer	next to river for retention (see above)			next to river	meadows as wind energy buffer	Health-oriented planning

Source: Own depiction, 2026.

The development of cross-border public parks is promoted particularly. Participants quickly established the consensus that public green spaces should be combined with residential areas to ensure their good accessibility (health-oriented and sustainable planning) and increase the region's attractiveness (see fig. 6). The importance of green spaces, especially meadows and parks for local recreation, was emphasised by all teams.

Many green spaces were grouped together and arranged close to the river to implement the game requirement for a continuous green axis. The connected green spaces near the river were justified by the increased quality of life (health-oriented planning), but also as a contribution to sustainable planning by linking the sub-regions (Wallonia) and to prevent urban sprawl respectively promoting densification in central locations (France, Saarland). Green spaces were also used as 'buffer' from the river to mitigate the flood risk (both German teams) and emissions from windmills (France).

Planning cultures and differences in planning paradigms

The reasoning of planning practitioners during the planning game revealed planning cultural similarities and differences. Often the teams shared a paradigm but interpret it differently. At the same time, attitudes towards the allocation of wind-energy and retail-led development were conflicting: some thought a shopping mall was necessary for economic growth while others rejected it as unnecessary or harmful to sustainability goals. Attitudes towards industrial or service-oriented developments were more lenient and uncritical but mostly implied a discussion about adjacent uses: In principle, emissions – either noise or air pollution - were important criteria for all teams in terms of usage distribution (health-oriented planning) but were not a criterion of exclusion. The same goes for flood protection (resilience): it was important for every team but implemented more or less strictly. Green spaces were allocated flexibly. Strikingly, finding the right balance between economic development (in terms of retail, industry, and green energy) and environmental priorities (ecology, health, quality of life) remained a key challenge in every region. On another note, findings from the planning game suggest (a) the presence of shared sustainable, resilient, health-oriented, just and integrated-strategic paradigms and (b) the emergence of a cross-border planning approach that includes communicative, incremental, and just processes. Conflicts remain in terms of spatial structure, flood risk, energy transition, commercial development.

The above-mentioned tendencies reveal the cultural embeddedness of cross-border spatial planning. There are shared ecological and urban priorities (e.g. sustainability, resilience, centrality, compact city and a focus on people and their health). These help to build a common ground (and to some extent even trust) during negotiations. The conflicting priorities which led to different regional planning processes and controversial discussions reflect divergent planning traditions and to some extent even governance cultures that collide. Intercultural understanding is crucial when interpreting these differences. At the very core of this interpretation lies the question which differences are more legitimate than others. The planning game also shows the importance of negotiations for finding hybrid solutions (as opposed to converging solutions) and thus communicative planning. However, such negotiations can only be successful if they build on cultural sensitivity and trust.

These findings are traces for distinct planning cultures, reflecting different planning traditions and indicate cultures that favour adaptive and negotiated planning over more rigid traditions. That said, the collaborative tendencies observed may be partly shaped by the game context, and real-world practice could prove more competitive. The findings also reveal a tension between economic competition on the one hand and more sustainability- and justice-oriented planning paradigms on the other. Comparing these perspectives matters because it illustrates both the complexity of cross-border cooperation in spatial planning and the conditions under which hybrid planning solutions tend to emerge.

Conclusions and outlook on planning cultural exchanges across borders

In this chapter, we reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of our planning game methodology in relation to our two main objectives, propose improvements for future planning cultural exchanges and discuss ways to sustain regular cross-border planning cultural exchanges in the Greater Region and beyond.

Regarding our first objective, i.e. fostering mutual intercultural understanding in cross-border spatial planning processes, the planning game proved effective in establishing contact among previously unacquainted participants, both within regional teams and across countries. Participants learned about neighbouring countries' planning systems, engaged in technical discussions and were encouraged to reflect on their own experiences. *Due to time constraints, however, the comparison of planning systems remained somewhat superficial, exposing gaps in participants' knowledge. We therefore recommend supplementing the introductory information with more in-depth exchanges on planning systems at future events.*

The online format also limited spontaneous conversation. Future editions should ideally be held face-to-face and on-site, enabling richer interaction during breaks and reducing technical barriers. By working through a cross-border scenario, participants gained a tangible sense of the complexity involved in cross-border **exchanges. The game thus served as both preparation and sensitisation, building an initial awareness of the importance of intercultural skills and competences in practice.**

The mix of experienced practitioners, emerging professionals and local decision-makers generated interactions that closely mirrored real-life dynamics. Experienced practitioners and elected representatives were called upon to explain and justify their approaches and choices, while emerging practitioners contributed creative and innovative ideas, demonstrating the value of their contributions during the collaborative process (cf. Rouchet, 2025).

To reach our second objective, i.e. collecting evidence and researching planning cultures, the planning game creates an engaging and playful setting that encourages active participation. One analytical limitation is that the game rules prescribe specific topics, objectives and tasks (e.g. addressing flood risk, developing a green network, designing

an Eco Region or developing renewable energies). This leaves open the question of whether participants would have raised these themes unprompted. Reducing prescribed requirements in future gaming sessions could lead to more authentic insights.

Time pressure due to technical difficulties constrained the gameplay. For future editions, we recommend separating the concept development phase within the regional groups from the cross-border event. Teams would prepare more detailed presentations, including visualisations like slides and sketches, allowing the cross-border event itself to focus on cross-border exchanges, short internal reflection phases, bilateral negotiations and the joint development of a shared planning concept. This structure would generate richer evidence on cross-border planning processes and cultures.

We also propose introducing an additional early phase with a scenario set entirely within a borderless territory. The border scenario would be added only in a subsequent phase. Comparing how teams plan across these two settings could reveal how the presence of a border influences strategic land-use decisions.

The involvement of younger and experienced professionals and local politicians reveals the different roles, responsibilities and decision-making processes that exist across countries. This is all the more true since participants draw on their own real practices. Structured reflection phases help participants identify these differences and translate that knowledge into professional practice (cf. Rouchet, 2025).

National, regional respectively local identities are deeply embedded in the societal environments that shape planning cultures. While it is difficult to derive concrete identity patterns from simulation game data alone, the game offers valuable insights: by observing planners in action we learn how they proceed, explain their decisions, set priorities and react when confronted with unfamiliar approaches.

The cross-border planning game forces stakeholders to reflect and negotiate beyond their established and accepted national or regional norms. This can foster a shared understanding of different planning paradigms and give rise to hybrid concepts that blend elements of distinct planning traditions (e.g. combining France's hierarchical planning logic with Germany's collaborative, 'Gegenstrom' (counter-flow) approach). Such hybrid governance arrangements may also lay the groundwork for new cross-border governance models. However, not all participants are equally equipped to navigate such negotiations. Finding a position, communicating it effectively and building support for it at home can be challenging. This 'creativity-under-pressure' poses interpretative difficulties for us during the analysis, particularly when deriving generalisable results.

Newly developed common identities (around flood resilience or green corridors in the planning game, for example) often come with a new common language and logic. These may compete with entrenched national identities. As a result, they compete with, or in some cases, disrupt traditional national or regional identities or development models. This points to a broader political sensitivity as cross-border concepts developed collaboratively may prove difficult to implement in real-life national contexts. Mutual intercultural understanding, as shown through our planning game, plays a crucial role in this process.

It facilitates negotiations, builds trust and is indispensable for communicative planning in cross-border settings that lack binding rules or shared authorities. Rather than producing convergence, it fosters hybrid, and admittedly to some extent fragmented, planning solutions across borders that reflect the full complexity of cross-border cooperation. It can also serve to prevent conflicts when planning priorities diverge.

Sustaining regular cross-border exchanges in the Greater Region and beyond requires institutional commitment and dedicated formats that go beyond one-off events. Planning games such as ours offer one such format. They are low-threshold, engaging and adaptable to different regional contexts and planning challenges. They can contribute to longer-term communities of practice that keep intercultural dialogue alive across electoral cycles, institutional changes and shifting political priorities. Embedding these exchanges within existing cross-border governance structures, academic networks or professional associations could help ensure their continuity.

Whilst the planning profession has traditionally regarded international comparisons as a valuable source of learning and innovation, the shifting geopolitical landscape and the rise of nationalist tendencies risk diminishing the perceived value of comparative and cross-border planning (Babalik, Frank & Sykes, 2026). In this context, sustained efforts to build intercultural learning competence do not only present academic merits, but they are also politically necessary.

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Borderwalks as a tool to foster European Integration

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Abstract

This contribution examines how guided “Borderwalks”, which are structured, thematic and participatory walks along national borders, can foster European integration by raising awareness of the legal, administrative, historical and cultural dimensions of border regions. Using the Upper Rhine region between Germany, France and Switzerland as a case study, “Borderwalks” are presented as an application-oriented tool for civil society, students, politicians and public administrations. Despite the objective of overcoming borders through European integration, border regions continue to face persistent legal, administrative and social barriers. The contribution first identifies the factors that shape European identity in border regions, drawing on insights from political science, social sciences and public administration, before introducing “Borderwalks” as a practical method that combines place-based learning with dialogue among diverse stakeholders. The Upper Rhine region exemplifies both the achievements and the remaining challenges of cross-border cooperation, including fragmented legal frameworks, differing administrative procedures and limited public awareness of EU policies. “Borderwalks” create a platform to identify and discuss these obstacles through concrete locations that illustrate border effects in everyday life, such as cross-border commerce, historical sites or transport infrastructure. These examples provide opportunities to explain differences in national legislation, the functioning of the EU internal market and the historical development of European cooperation. Conducted bilingually or with simultaneous translation, “Borderwalks” also promote multilingualism and intercultural exchange. Beyond raising awareness, they can contribute to identifying practical legal and administrative solutions to cross-border barriers, such as the mutual recognition of administrative requirements or improvements in cross-border transport. As a bottom-up approach, the concept complements the objectives of ECBM 2.0 by strengthening European identity and promoting the European values of freedom of movement, democracy, and the rule of law. While centred on the Upper Rhine region, the proposed methodology is readily transferable to other European border regions.

Keywords: Borderwalk, Border Effects, Legal and Administrative, European Fundamental Freedoms, Didactic Tool

Introduction

Even though political borders, for example within the European Union, have in many cases become physically and materially less visible as a result of European integration, border regions continue to experience a disproportionate number of legal, administrative and socio-economic challenges arising from the existing of national boundaries. At the same time, these regions reveal a unique laboratory of historical, cultural, linguistic and institutional similarities and differences that shape everyday cross-border interactions.

In this context, the concept of the Borderwalk was developed within in the cross-border Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence (University of Strasbourg, 2025). The Borderwalk is an innovative educational format, that enables participants to explore and critically reflect on the multiple dimensions of borders within a short walking distance. The aim is, to experience various scientific dimensions of a border that is often invisible at first glance today by means of visible border effects and to show its scientific background.

The novelty of the Borderwalk is that it can be used to convey interdisciplinary content on the one hand and can be adapted to various target groups of students, experts from science and research to administrative staff and multilingual for international groups on the other hand.

By raising awareness of the (in)visible manifestations of borders in everyday life, the Borderwalk contributes to fostering European integration at the subnational level in border regions. It encourages participants to better understand both the achievements and the remaining challenges of European integration, thereby strengthening cross-border cooperation, mutual understanding and a shared sense of European belonging.

Borderwalk, Border and Boundary Effects - Terms, Definitions and Didactic Classification

To examine the potential of Borderwalks as a tool for fostering European integration through the identification and visualisation of cross-border obstacles, the article first outlines the conceptual foundations of the Borderwalk and subsequently situates it within a didactic framework. For this purpose, the terms of the Borderwalk, the border and border effects are first defined and illustrated using the first cross-border Borderwalk to be implemented in Kehl/Strasbourg. In the following section, the Borderwalk as a concept will be analysed from a didactic perspective.

Borderwalk - Definition and dissemination of the Borderwalk as a term and tool

The term Borderwalk has not yet been comprehensively defined. Linguistically, it combines the terms “border” as synonym for boundary and “walk” as a route for light strolling or a short hike. Accordingly, the term in its literal sense initially includes a walk along and across a border.

As developed in the context of this contribution, however, the Borderwalk represents considerably more than a physical route. The overarching goal of the Borderwalk concept – apart of the aim of fostering European Integration is to make it possible to experience various scientific dimensions of a border that is often invisible at first glance today by means of visible border effects within a manageable distance and to show their legal and administrative background.

Comparable initiatives can be found in several cross-border contexts. Borderwalks in a similar sense have been organised along the Austrian-Czech border (Regional Management Oberösterreich, 2025), in Bratislava (BAUM cityregion, 2024) and in other forms on the border between Mexico and the USA (North Dakota State University, 2012). In a different form – without a guided route – but under the term “Borderwalk”, a comparable project was carried out within the framework of the cross-border Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence by Marlies Vermeulen and Remy Kroese with a “Border Crossing Act Instrument” (University of Strasbourg, 2023).

The Borderwalk model developed at Kehl University of Applied Sciences (Kehl University of Applied Sciences, 2024) differs from these approaches through its stronger orientation towards a didactic tool which is versatile, making it adaptable to both interdisciplinary contexts and specific target groups.

Borders and Border Effects

The concept of the Borderwalk implies a boundary (“border”). In the context of this contribution, however, the term is understood in a broad sense.

In its primary understanding, the term encompasses the border in the sense of a political-geographical sovereignty dividing line between the territory of two states or their subdivisions (Khan, 2004, p. 12 ff.). A distinction is made here between so-called natural borders of the first order (which, due to their separating form as obstacles to mobility, are often also cultural and linguistic borders, such as mountain ridges) and the later natural borders of the second order, such as rivers, which originally had a primarily connecting character, but were often changeable due to the lack of canalisation and were therefore typically only defined as natural borders in the 19th century. However, boundaries can also be defined independently of natural features, so-called tearing bed boundaries as straight lines between two points or along longitude or latitude.

At the same time, the concept of a border cannot be reduced to a political or geographical line (Kleinschmidt, 2011, p. 9 ff.). From a geographical perspective, spatial transition areas can also be defined as border regions. Borders can also be transitional areas between two different (e.g. aggregate or mind) states, (mental) spaces, systems or categories. A boundary can therefore also be understood physically, conceptually or functionally and marks the end of one area as well as the beginning of another.

Closely related to the concept of borders are border effects. Within border studies (the term also occurs in other academic disciplines), border effects could be understood as all direct and indirect effects of borders on social, economic, cultural and political processes in the areas adjacent to the borders. The term is intended to cover both separating and connecting effects of borders (Brunet-Jailly, 2011, p. 1f.; Brunet-Jailly, 2005, p. 633 f.).

Application examples: The Borderwalks in Kehl/Strasbourg and Breisach/Neuf-Brisach

In the following, the basic concept of the Borderwalk between Kehl (Germany) and Strasbourg (France), which was the first Borderwalk concretely implemented by Kehl University of Applied Sciences, will be presented exemplarily.

The university's geographical location, situated 800 metres from the German-French border along the Rhine, provides particularly favourable conditions. Kehl University of Applied Sciences offers interdisciplinary programmes preparing students for careers in public administration.

The guided Borderwalk currently implemented in the Kehl-Strasbourg border region (University of Strasbourg, 2024) is intended to sensitise the participants to various legal and administrative aspects of the European Union and cross-border cooperation over a distance of approximately 3.5 kilometres, starting at the Hochschule/Läger stop of the cross-border Strasbourg tram on the German side of the Rhine. These aspects are intended to complement the teaching of legal and administrative content, which represents about 50 % of the curriculum.

Figure 1: Typical route of the Borderwalk Kehl/Strasbourg; visualisation by Google Maps

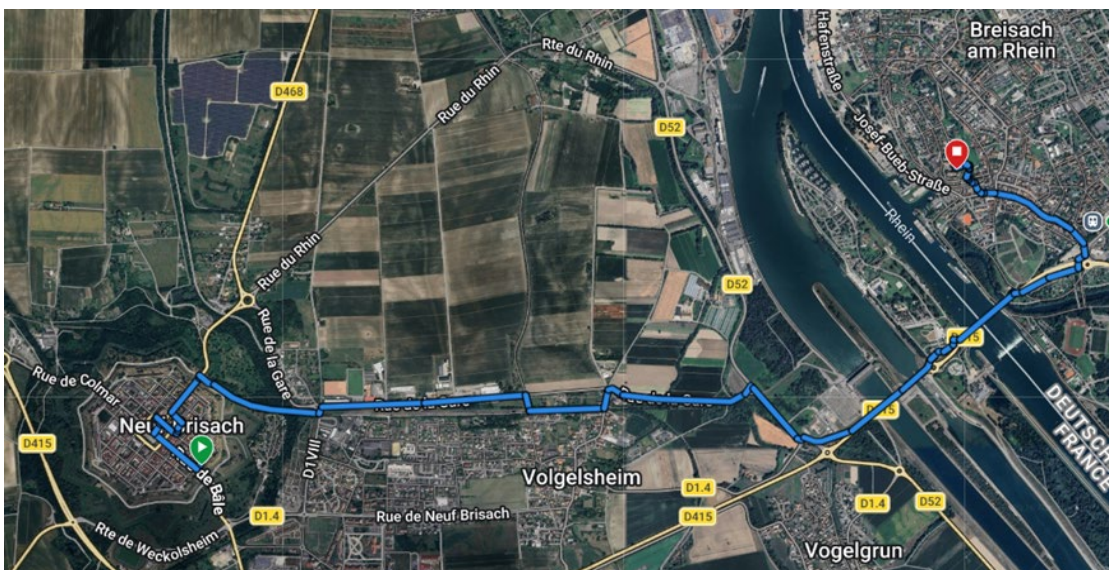


At the same time, the Borderwalk can currently be addressed on the same route in a targeted and subject-specific way, for example on aspects of the EU internal market and fundamental freedoms, the common history of Kehl and Strasbourg, wars and cultures of remembrance, on the complexity of cross-border cooperation in various policy areas from internal security and police and customs cooperation, to cross-border infrastructures (new construction of the Europa Bridge, Passerelle, local heating networks, cross-border tram) as well as visible signs of the otherwise invisible legal and administrative border.

The interdisciplinary character of the Borderwalk enables the integration of perspectives from border studies, law and administrative sciences, European studies, political science, history, architecture, urban and spatial planning (urbanism), as well as sociology, can be addressed as academic disciplines.

Beyond its educational objectives, the Borderwalk also highlights the unique selling points of Kehl University of Applied Sciences, in particular its application orientation, its focus on public administration, Europe and cross-border cooperation, as well as the implementation of foreign-language study modules (Filière Française). The range of target groups is extensive and ranges from groups of students from European Schools who request the Borderwalk in connection with a visit to the city of Strasbourg or the European Parliament as part of excursions or project days on these topics, to international students (Erasmus+ incomings), international visitor groups (e.g. at research workshops), stakeholder groups, to the public and various local actors of civil society. The Borderwalk thus reflects the university's "Third Mission" by extending academic engagement beyond teaching and research and facilitating the exchange of knowledge with societal actors (University of Vienna, 2021; Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung, 2025).

Figure 2: Typical route of the Borderwalk Breisach/Neuf-Breisach; visualisation by Google Maps



Recently, the concept of the Borderwalk had been expanded together with students and research assistants to the area of Neuf Brisach – Breisach on an approximately 6.5 km long walk from Neuf-Brisach (France) to Breisach (Germany), which could also be done on foot, by e-scooter, or by bicycle.

Next to come is a trinational Borderwalk around Basel Badischer Bahnhof. In addition, a videographic preparation of the border walk was commissioned with the aim of being able to offer a digital “bad weather option”. Furthermore, multi-day options of the concept as well as an unguided alternative are also to be developed. This means that Borderwalks can also be integrated into third-place encounter programmes (Baden-Württemberg, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2025).

Subject-specific and didactic classification of the basic concept

The basic concept of the Borderwalk, which can be expanded in many ways, can be integrated into various subject-specific and subject-didactic contexts. While its conceptual foundations are closely linked to law and administrative sciences, the format is equally applicable to fields such as spatial and urban planning, economics, architecture and sociology.

With the didactic (meta-)concept of the Borderwalk, subject-specific content from various scientific disciplines can be combined with interdisciplinary general didactic elements such as learning in public space, target group differentiation, project-oriented learning or citizenship education (Ehmke, Reusser & Fischer-Schöneborn, 2022), which will be briefly outlined below.

Overarching didactic elements

With the aim of creating a tool that is as application-oriented as possible, which presents theoretical and practical aspects of (in)visible boundary features in an application-oriented and target group-specific way, numerous overarching didactic elements were combined in the development of the Borderwalk. This shows that the concept of the Borderwalk is predestined for use in interdisciplinary teaching/learning scenarios.

Learning in public spaces

In spatial terms, the Borderwalk can be seen as an embodiment of the concept of learning in public space. In the context of spatial planning, public space is initially understood as “the totality of all urban spaces that are fundamentally accessible and usable by the general public” (Berding & Selle, 2018, p. 1639). As the basic concept of the Borderwalk takes place outside conventional educational settings and is conducted along publicly accessible streets, pathways, and open spaces, it directly engages with such environments as learning spaces. However, it can also be subsumed under the sociological definitional approaches, according to which space is defined as “relational (arrangement) of living beings and social goods in places” (Löw, 2022, p. 25, 171) and the public sphere

as “the general access to something” (Habermas, 2023). The concept is based on the combination of formal learning at the various waystations, where certain connections are taught, and informal learning through the absorption and experience of the impressions during the course of the route and the cognitive link between the two forms of learning. The findings from both forms can be secured, for example, as part of a follow-up afterwards.

Target group differentiation as a didactic principle

Another characteristic of the Borderwalk is that the didactic concept can be differentiated according to target groups. Target group differentiation is a didactic principle according to which the teaching/learning offers can be adapted to the individual or group-specific requirements of the learners in terms of personnel, with the aim of constructively taking heterogeneity into account in learning processes and thus breaking down learning barriers. Differentiation can take place in various dimensions, for example in the adaptation of intellectual levels, but also in terms of language (multilingualism) as well as thematic interests, cultural backgrounds, prior knowledge and other (e.g. social) factors.

The Borderwalk accommodates such differentiation by allowing content, language, methodological approaches and discussion formats to be adapted to the respective target audience. Consequently, identical geographical routes and learning setting can be utilised to address diverse educational objectives and participant groups. This flexibility enables the format to reach learners with different levels of expertise and varying interests while maintaining a coherent spatial and conceptual framework.

Project-based learning

The Borderwalk exhibits key characteristics of project-based learning. The term project-oriented learning is understood to mean “learning in social contexts with a meaningful reference to the living environment with the active participation and responsibility of the learners” (Gudjons, 2014, p. 137). By linking academic content directly to observable phenomena within a cross-border environment, the Borderwalk facilitates the contextualisation of theoretical knowledge and promotes the development of problem-oriented perspectives.

It is also conceivable that certain target groups, such as students, could be involved in the development of the Borderwalks through suitable teaching/learning events. Thus, the Borderwalk is particularly suitable for curricular integration, for example into the introductory phase of studies in addition to the student recruitment phase. In terms of content, new stations can be developed and thematised, but also Borderwalks can be individualised and developed individually, for example in the form of podcasts or video clips.

In this respect, students can participate in the creation of their own Borderwalk and adopt the concept and the content to be conveyed with it.

Experimental learning

The Borderwalk can furthermore be interpreted through the lens of experimental learning. This is particularly evident when participants are involved in the preparation of the Borderwalk, such as groups of students who, after completing a Borderwalk, are given the task in the course of a teaching/learning event to find suitable stations for a certain other topic or for a comparable thematisation at another point and to describe them scientifically and then present this on the occasion of a trial run, the “experimental learning cycle”, consisting of the four characteristic stages (experience, reflection, conceptualisation, active experimentation), is passed through (Kolb, 2014, p. 50 ff.). In this sense, Borderwalks could be also integrated into the framework of research-based learning (Huber, 2015, p. 15 ff.).

European Education / Citizenship education

From the perspective of European education or citizenship education, the goal of education is seen as enabling “the confrontation with socially relevant key problems that affect the life of the individual and the coexistence in society” (Klafki, 2007, p. 60). The walk along the border, in which (in)visible border features are deliberately made tangible, precisely enables this confrontation with various key problems that affect individual or overall social daily coexistence.

In the area of legal courses (constitutional and European law), there are various ways of addressing European fundamental freedoms and the principle of territoriality under international law. Also, in the context of school education, which can be associated with the university as a venue as a direct starting point for early career and study orientation at grammar schools, a thematisation of European values and basic structures in the subject of social studies would be just as conceivable as a historical outline of European integration.

In addition, it is also conceivable to address key problems or circumstances relevant to civil society, for example regarding the cross-border consumption behaviour of tobacco products.

Bilingual teaching / subject-specific language acquisition

The Borderwalk also offers considerable potential for bilingual and multilingual learning environments. Language acquisition is particularly efficient when language is seen primarily as a means of communication, especially successful communication aimed at mutual understanding is considered more important than grammatically and error-free use of the language. In this respect, the Borderwalk can offer an activating introduction that lowers the inhibition threshold to communicate in the target language through the concrete confrontation with the respective other language, border encounters with people or even

street or advertising signs (Frey, 2014, p. 310). This effect can be reinforced by the fact that the participants in the Borderwalk come from both countries, for example in the context of a cross-border course (e.g. cross-border project management) designed together with a partner institution. The target group of civil society, for example through the involvement of German and French citizens from Kehl and Strasbourg, could experience a lively bilingual discussion at the individual stations of the Borderwalk.

Other didactic elements

In addition to the didactic elements mentioned above, the Borderwalk incorporates through its involvement of the participants further didactic elements, such as interactive learning, collaborative knowledge construction and situated learning. Depending on its design and intended audience, the format may also include aspects of service learning, particularly in cases where the Borderwalk is later made available to society.

General scientific background: Borderwalks and Cross-border governance

Characteristic of all cross-border Borderwalk concepts is that, in addition to its overarching didactic classification and the specific didactic elements, the format can generally be seen as an element of horizontal integration (Beck, J. 2022, p. 24 f.) in the context of cross-border governance (Frey, 2011).

Specific scientific elements and subject-didactic dimensions

While the overarching didactic principles of the Borderwalk remain largely transferable across disciplines, the respective subject-didactic and thus methodological and non-material elements naturally vary between the various scientific disciplines.

From a didactic point of view, the various stations should be classified as an application of the case study method, enabling participants to analyse concrete situations and derive broader insights from particular examples (Zumbach, Haider & Mandl, 2008, p. 1 f.)

Using the example of law, the Borderwalk can procedurally use the method of an inspection (e.g. § 26(1) no. 4 VwVfG) in the context of the required investigation of the facts (§ 24(1) VwVfG). Consequently, the practical application of the principle of official investigation is one of the central aspects of legal and administrative science education as it takes place at Kehl University of Applied Sciences.

Interim conclusion

With this Borderwalk concept, numerous individual didactic elements can be linked together. Due to its scalability and adaptability to different target groups, the concept can be broadly applied in various subject-didactic contexts.

Basic concept and potential variations of the Borderwalk

In the following, the basic concept - illustrated by the specific examples of the Borderwalks already implemented in Kehl/Strasbourg and Neuf-Brisach/Breisach - will be used as a basis for discussing further variations.

Basic concept of the Borderwalk

The basic concept of the Borderwalk is to make the border - which is usually invisible - visible and scientifically explainable within a cross-border living space, using the shortest possible route to highlight its visible effects. Ideally, the stops along this route can be organised around different subject areas and academic disciplines.

In its basic conception, the Borderwalk consists of a walking route that connects the various stations. Whenever feasible, the route is organised as a circular trail. Where a circular route cannot be realised, the outward or return journey may be completed by cross-border public transport services, such as train, bus or tram connections, thereby incorporating additional dimensions of cross-border mobility into the experience.

The didactic structure of each station follows a three-step approach consisting of observation, explanation and thematic contextualisation. Participants are first invited to identify and describe the observable characteristics of the site (“What can be seen here?”). Subsequently, explanatory perspectives are introduced in order to analyse the underlying causes and mechanisms (“Why is this the case?”). Finally, these explanations are adapted to the respective target audience and embedded within the overarching thematic focus of the Borderwalk. This approach combines empirical observation with scientific interpretation and facilitates the communication of complex border-related phenomena in an accessible and context-sensitive manner.

Exemplary representation of a Borderwalk station with Theming - Tobacco shops on the German side near the border

A particularly illustrative Borderwalk station is provided by tobacco shops located on the German side of the Franco-German border. As a classic example of a station can serve a tobacco shop on the German side near the border with French cigarette advertising. These establishments make visible the practical consequences of regulatory and fiscal differences between the neighbouring states and thereby offer an accessible entry point for discussing European integration and cross-border economic behaviour.

At the level of direct observation, in both cities, a building on the German side can be seen, which is usually close to the border, which can be reached directly by car and which is aimed at walk-in customers. A striking feature is the extensive use of French-language advertising for cigarettes and other tobacco products (“ancien prix”). Promotional materials frequently include French health warnings, such as “fumer diminue la fertilité.

Moreover, many of these businesses display the traditional French symbol of licensed tobacco retailers (“la carotte”), indicating that their primary clientele consists of French-speaking consumers. In some cases, the operators themselves are French nationals.

*Figure 3: Tobacco shop in Kehl
(SWR, 2025)*



*Figure 4: Tobacco shop in Breisach
(Badische Zeitung, 2024).*



In this example, the explanatory dimension and thematic contextualisation focuses on the economic and legal factors underlying this spatial concentration of tobacco retailers. The target group adaptation is usually done via the aspect that tobacco products are probably cheaper in Germany than in France. In addition, the opening and operation of a tobacco shop in Germany - even for French nationals - could probably be less restrictive than in France.

In terms of trade law, the normal business licence in this respect should be considered here, as well as the special provisions of the Tobacco Tax Act and the Youth Protection Act (advertising regulations).

With regard to the topic of the European Union or EU law, it should be pointed out that strict quantitative restrictions on the duty-free import of tobacco products for non-commercial, personal use from an EU country to France, as they used to exist on the basis of a decree (e.g. on 200 cigarettes, a stick), no longer exist (Voisin’s neighbors, 2024) today, now the EU guideline values (about 800 cigarettes, 4 cartons) are used as the benchmark. In this respect, Union citizens can now make use of the free movement of goods (Art. 28 et seq. TFEU, in particular the prohibition of customs duties Art. 30 TFEU and the prohibition of quantitative restrictions on imports and measures having equivalent effect, Art. 34 TFEU) within these guideline values.

The opening of a corresponding business is also possible for French nationals without discrimination within the framework of the freedom of establishment (Art. 49 TFEU). The accumulation can also be explained by the fact that no minimum distances or numerical limits are currently permitted between tobacco shops - unlike, for example, between gambling halls (§ 25(1) GlüStV 2021).

In France, on the other hand, the sale of tobacco products is permitted only in special tobacco shops (*bureau de tabac*) and subject to numerous additional restrictions (Article L 3512-10 et seq. of the Public Security Code).

The background to the different prices for tobacco products is actually the different levels of tobacco tax at national level.

Tobacco tax in Germany is regulated by the Tobacco Tax Act. For example, for cigarettes, it amounts to 12.28 cents plus 19.84% of the retail selling price, but at least 24,163 cents per cigarette less the VAT of the retail selling price, for a pack of 20 cigarettes, therefore at least 3.56 euros.

In France, the tax is determined by Art. 565 et seq. of the *Code général des impôts* and Art. L314-24 et seq. of the *Code des impositions sur les biens et services*.

The price of a pack of Marlboro brand cigarettes with 20 cigarettes was between 8.70 and 9 euros in Germany in 2024, and around 11 euros in France (Statista, 2026).

Variations of the Borderwalk Concept (on the same route)

The Borderwalk concept is inherently adaptable and can be modified along several dimensions. The following variations involve conducting the same Borderwalk (same route) with stronger thematic focus and thus differ from the versions described above, which propose more significant conceptual deviations.

Same route, different thematic perspectives

A key strength of the Borderwalk lies in the fact that individual stations can be interpreted through multiple disciplinary lenses. The same route may therefore be offered with different thematic focal points depending on the educational objectives and the expertise of the organisers. While the basic version developed at Kehl – Strasbourg primarily focuses on legal and administrative dimensions, alternative thematic perspectives can easily be integrated.

Possible thematic variants include historical perspectives, migration and cross-border mobility, architectural and urban-development patterns, language use and advertising practises, as well as regulatory frameworks such as gambling regulation, cannabis legislation or taxation.

Same route, different target groups

Beyond thematic variation, the Borderwalk can also be adapted to different target audiences. Within the university context, the concept may be employed not only for students from various disciplines but also for perspective students, international guests (groups) such as incoming Erasmus students or guest researchers in order to sensibilise them for the specific aspects of border regions and European Integration.

Suitable target groups in this sense could also be actors in (local) civil society, visitor groups or tourists in general in order to reach the civil society. Furthermore, the Borderwalk can be tailored to local and regional government officials, administrative practitioners and political decision-makers. In these cases, the thematic focus may shift towards issues such as municipal public infrastructure and cross-border administrative cooperation.

Alternative variations of Mobility and Route Design

In addition to the possibilities of adapting the same route to other thematic contexts and other target groups, some further variations would be conceivable on this basis.

Other means of transport - other routes

An adaptation or extension of the routes is obvious, provided that other means of transport and modes of transport are considered. While walking remains the most direct ways of experiencing the spatial manifestations of borders, alternative modes of mobility may broaden the range of accessible stations and mobility-themed perspectives.

In this context, it is conceivable to offer a cross-border sports programme that takes up the (in)visible border aspects as an intercultural encounter concept (e.g. a running group).

The use of e-scooters or bicycles, for example in connection with appropriate public rental systems, should also be considered. In this case, a corresponding point of contact for the border walk theme is likely to lie directly in the means of transport itself, as corresponding rental systems are often not applicable across borders.

An adaptation of the means of transport would have to be adapted according to a barrier-free route design that is suitable for people with limited mobility. In the basic option of the border walk already carried out at Kehl University of Applied Sciences, accessibility is given.

The advantage of this is greater mobility and thus a larger number of different stations and thus the creation of a network of potential stations that can be individually put together by individual users of the concept.

Individual and Self-Guided Formats

The Borderwalk may also be implemented in self-guided formats. In such cases, participants explore the route independently while receiving information through digital or physical guidance systems. Possible approaches include fixed QR codes at stations, mobile web applications or GPS-based guidance tools that provide location-specific information and tasks.

Such self-guided formats increase flexibility and scalability while reducing organisational requirements. They also allow participants to explore the route on their own and according to their individual interests.

High-End Alternative: Unguided Borderwalk with Mental Maps

A more exploratory variant consists of an unguided Borderwalk based on the method of mental mapping. In this format, the participants at a certain starting point are asked to get to another destination on the other side of the border independently and with a free choice of means of transport. On the way, the participants are asked to fill out a mental map with which they trace their route and freely draw or write down their associations with the border or the border effects.

The concept builds on the model of a Border Crossing Act instrument developed by Marlies Vermeulen and Remy Kroese and shown as part of the activities of the cross-border Jean Monnet Center of Excellence (University of Strasbourg, 2023).

Digital and weather-independent alternative

Regardless of potential expansion and adaptation options for the Borderwalk, it can be transferred into digital formats. Such adaptations may serve as weather-independent alternatives, accessibility measures, or instruments for reaching geographically dispersed audiences.

By means of a videographic preparation of the route to be run, the border walk can be simulated accordingly and can be carried out without restrictions even in potentially bad weather. For example, an event format in the context of an interactive discussion round could be considered, in which the video is played to the participants and interrupted or rounded off by corresponding speeches planned for the individual stations. This option is also ideal for target group and topic-specific adaptation and could also be offered in a hybrid or online format. This possibility also opens up the opportunity to reach members of other border areas with this topic. For example, an online event format would be conceivable, in which representatives of different border regions make their respective (in) visible border features available for joint discussion. Ideally, in addition to the scientists, students who can have this event format credited (for example in the form of a seminar) should also be included.

Multi-day formats and integration into multi-day events

The Borderwalk can also be easily integrated into cross-border third-party encounters or seminars, for example in a school or student context, or in the context of town and municipality partnerships for cross-border cooperation or German-French friendship.

Building on this approach, the concept may also be expanded into multi-day event formats dedicated to the exploration of border regions. Such programmes could be held “along the borders”, combining several Borderwalks conducted at different border crossings, for example at Breisach - Neuf Brisach or Weil am Rhein – Basel.

Empirical values of already carried out Borderwalks

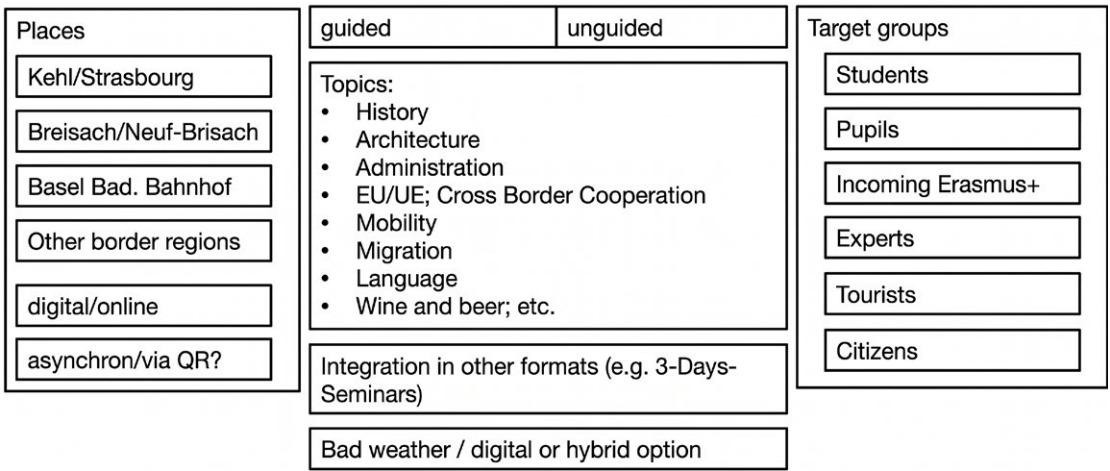
Since the development and first implementation of the Borderwalk concept presented in 2023, more than 30 walks in Kehl/Strasbourg with over 500 participants and 2 test walks in Breisach/Neuf-Brisach with a total of 40 participants in German, French or English, with and without translation, have been carried out on a voluntary basis. In addition to schoolchildren, the target groups of the previous implementation were students, researchers, administrative experts (practitioners) and members of civil society and even residents.

Participant feedback was extremely positive, several participants participated more than one time. Options of deepening the discussed topics were frequently asked. A didactical embedding in the sense of preparation or debriefing is increasing the added value.

The Borderwalk variations - graphical summary

The following graphic is intended to graphically summarise the goal and customisation options of the Borderwalk:

Figure 5: Representation of the various conceivable options of the borderwalk, own illustration.



Conclusion: Characteristic Features of the Borderwalk and how it fosters European Integration

The Borderwalk represents a didactic concept that can be adapted and scaled in several dimensions, with which a now largely invisible border can be made perceptible by means of visible border effects. By combining direct observation with contextual explanation, the concept translates abstract political, legal, economic and social themes into tangible learning experiences situated within a concrete cross-border environment.

The particular strength of the Borderwalk lies in its multidimensionality and scalability: the concept can be adapted or scaled vertically to different target groups (e.g. from national or international pupils to students to civil society actors or administrators or researchers), as well as horizontally to a variety of policy fields such as political systems, law, architecture, history, migration or mobility. At the same time, the Borderwalk remains spatially transferable and can be implemented in different locations within the same border region or adapted to entirely different border contexts. The Borderwalk concept can still be used spatially flexibly and can be transferred to various border locations in the same border area (in this case, for example, the German-French border area, in this case, for example, Kehl/Strasbourg, Breisach/Neuf-Brisach) or to other border areas. As the border effects have similar reasons especially the borders in middle and eastern Europe (e.g. the border of Germany and Poland) seem to be predestined for a transfer of the concept in order to reinforce cross border cooperation.

Beyond its didactic value, however, the concept has a particular potential to foster European Integration. One of the paradoxes of successful integration is that many of its achievements have become largely invisible in everyday life. Open borders, freedom of movement, cross-border commuting, integrated labour markets and shared public spaces are often taken for granted by citizens, especially in highly integrated border regions. At the same time, national legal systems, administrative structures and cultural practices continue to produce visible differences and border effects. The Borderwalk makes this dual reality visible: it demonstrates both the visible and invisible border effects and highlights the extent to which European Integration has transformed the borders' significance. Thereby, the Borderwalk enables a multi-perspective examination of borders and border effects as social, political and spatial phenomena and contributes to the formation of a reflected European border awareness.

Moreover, the concept creates opportunities for intercultural encounter and dialogue. By bringing together participants from different national, linguistic and professional backgrounds, Borderwalks encourage the exchange of perspectives on shared cross-border spaces. Such interactions can strengthen mutual understanding, reduce mental barriers and contribute to the development of a common sense of belonging within Europe.

In doing so, the Borderwalk is a didactic tool that raises awareness of European aspects, (in)visible border characteristics and, from a technical point of view, a target group-oriented space for knowledge and discussion in a low-threshold manner by means of an easily adaptable concept.

Notes

The concept of the Borderwalk was developed in the network of the cross-border Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence and funded by the Franco-German-French Citizens' Fund on 25 January 2024.

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Cross-Border Civic Participation Portal: Actively Shaping Border Regions

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Abstract

Border regions in Europe are increasingly characterised by functional integration in everyday life, while democratic participation and digital participation infrastructures largely remain confined to national frameworks. This paper examines how a cross-border digital citizen participation platform for border regions could be designed, using the Upper Rhine as a case study. It asks which functions such a platform should fulfil, which criteria it must meet, and how it should be institutionally and legally structured. The analysis combines conceptual discussion with an examination of existing participation instruments and cross-border governance arrangements in the European Union, Germany, France, and the Upper Rhine region. It shows that most existing cross-border platforms remain limited to information provision and, at best, consultation, while genuine citizen empowerment is largely absent. The paper argues that cross-border digital participation cannot simply replicate national models but requires a hybrid architecture combining formal, legally embedded procedures with low-threshold informal mechanisms. A viable platform therefore needs multilingual access, hybrid online-offline formats, transparent feedback mechanisms, and stronger legal foundations for cross-border consultation.

Keywords: Digital citizen participation; E-participation; Cross-border governance; Border regions; Upper Rhine; Franco-German cooperation; Participatory platforms

Introduction

In Europe, border regions are not merely administrative peripheries, but functionally integrated living spaces where people cross borders daily to work, shop, seek medical care, or maintain family ties. In the Upper Rhine region, one of Europe's most densely interconnected border areas, tens of thousands of people commute daily between Germany, France, and Switzerland. And yet: when it comes to participating in political decisions affecting this shared living space, the available participation portals stop at the border, precisely where the reality of people's lives has long ceased to be national.

This problem forms the starting point of this study. In recent years, digital citizen participation platforms have become an important instrument of democratic participation at the national and local levels. They offer low-threshold access to consultation processes, enable the submission of citizen proposals, and make political decision-making processes more transparent. Yet this progress simultaneously reproduces a structural gap: Participation infrastructures are almost without exception geared toward national or subnational legal frameworks and end at the national border. To the extent that digital participation offerings exist at all in cross-border contexts, they are often project-based, short-term, and institutionally disconnected. They represent fragmented, isolated solutions rather than a coherent participation architecture. Furthermore, existing cross-border portals are limited in content to institutional reporting and the provision of information; genuine citizen participation in the form of interaction, consultation, or even co-decision-making remains marginal.

Against this backdrop, this thesis poses the following research question: How should such a platform for border regions be specifically designed, both functionally and legally?

The aim of this thesis is twofold. In terms of content, it examines which participation formats, functional modules, and quality criteria a cross-border citizen participation portal requires in order to move beyond the current stage of mere information provision (e-enabling) and enable genuine political co-determination (e-empowering). From a legal perspective, the study examines the existing legal foundations and the need for reform to institutionally anchor cross-border citizen participation, particularly through amendments to the legal bases for cross-border consultations in the respective sector-specific laws, utilising the instruments of cross-border-friendly legislation: opening clauses and mutual recognition of participation procedures. The possibilities and limitations of this legal framework will be examined in the course of the study at the bilateral level (Treaty of Aachen, Articles 12 and 13).

Methodologically, the study follows the principle of “form follows function”: It is not the existing legal frameworks that determine what is possible, but rather the functions desirable from a democratic perspective that define the standard against which legal feasibility is measured. First, the theoretical foundations and existing forms of participation at the EU, national, and cross-border levels are examined, before Chapter 5 analyses concrete platform examples and cross-border participation approaches. Building on this, Chapter 6 systematizes the central challenges and develops proposals for design, both functionally and legally. Chapter 7 concludes with a summary and an outlook on the need for further research and action.

Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative, document-based analytical approach to examine the current state of cross-border digital citizen participation in the Upper Rhine region. Rather than relying on primary data collection through interviews or surveys, the analysis draws on publicly available institutional documents, official platform content, legal texts, and academic literature to systematically map and evaluate existing participation instruments.

Case selection criteria

The institutions and platforms analyzed in Chapter 5 were selected according to three criteria. First, a geographic focus criterion restricted the sample to institutions and digital offerings that explicitly address the Upper Rhine region as a cross-border space, spanning Baden-Württemberg and Grand Est. Purely national or subnational platforms without a cross-border mandate were excluded from the core sample. Second, a temporal criterion required that the examined instruments be operational and publicly accessible at the time of research (2026). Third, an accessibility criterion limited the sample to platforms and institutions with a publicly documented digital presence (website, portal, or online service), ensuring that the analysis could be conducted transparently and reproducibly on the basis of available documentation.

Analytical framework

Each selected institution or platform was evaluated along two complementary dimensions. The first dimension applies Macintosh's three-stage e-participation model (Macintosh, 2004, p. 2–3) to classify the functional depth of citizen involvement offered by each instrument. The second dimension categorises each instrument according to the formal/informal/financial typology developed in Chapter 4, distinguishing legally codified participation procedures from voluntary, dialogue-oriented formats and from financially mediated forms of civic engagement. Combining both dimensions allows the analysis to capture not only how much participation an instrument enables, but also its institutional and legal status.

Data sources and limitations

The empirical basis for this classification consists exclusively of secondary sources: official websites, annual reports, strategy documents, and legal texts (e.g. the Treaty of Aachen, regional statutes) rather than interviews, surveys, or other primary data collection with platform operators or citizens. This document-based approach allows for a systematic, transparent, and comparable overview of the existing participation landscape, but it does not capture user experience, actual usage intensity, the perspectives of platform administrators or the Franco-German legislative process within ministries and parliamentary administrations.

Terminology and Theoretical Framework

Terminology

The term **e-government** essentially refers to the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the context of governance and administration. According to Jörn von Lucke and Heinrich Reinermann, e-government encompasses “the handling of business processes related to governance and administration (government) using information and communication technologies via electronic media” (von Lucke & Reinermann, 2002, p. 1). A similarly broad definition is provided by the OECD’s, according to which e-government encompasses the use of new ICT across the entire spectrum of governmental and administrative functions—from the provision of administrative services and policy-making to internal administrative structures and processes. (OECD, 2001, p. 2)

E-participation refers to the involvement of citizens in political decision-making processes through the use of ICT. It is considered a subset of e-government with a particular focus on citizen participation and democratic processes. The best-known academic definition comes from Sæbø, Rose, and Flak, who describe e-participation as an ICT-mediated social activity that includes interaction between citizens, public administration, and political actors. (Sæbø, Rose, & Flak, 2008, pp. 400–401) This definition emphasises the triangular relationship between citizens, administration, and politics as the central level of actors. (Le Blanc, 2020, p. 4) The United Nations defines e-participation as the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery so as to make it participatory, inclusive, and deliberative. (United Nations, 2014, p. 61)

Ann Macintosh distinguishes three levels of e-participation: e-enabling (provision of information), e-engaging (consultation), and e-empowering (active co-decision-making). (Macintosh, 2004, p. 2–3) This classification is based on the classic participation model developed by Arnstein (1969), who distinguished eight levels of participation on a “Ladder of Citizen Participation”—ranging from mere manipulation through information and consultation to genuine citizen control. (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217)

Levels of E-Participation

Research on e-participation distinguishes between various levels of participation that describe the degree to which citizens influence political processes. The best-known and most widely used international model of e-participation levels was developed by Ann Macintosh (Macintosh, 2004, p. 2–3) and was adopted by the United Nations as the conceptual basis for its E-Government Survey. (United Nations, 2014, p. 63) The model distinguishes three sequential stages—E-Enabling, E-Engaging, and E-Empowering—which range from passive, informational participation to active co-decision-making.

Stage 1 – E-Enabling (Provision of Information):

The first and most basic stage describes the one-way provision of information by government agencies to citizens via ICT. Macintosh describes this stage as a prerequisite for all further forms of participation: citizens are enabled to understand political processes and participate in them, without, however, actively intervening in decisions themselves. (Macintosh, 2004, p. 3) Typical tools include public information portals, newsletters, official documents, and databases. United Nations studies summarise this stage under the term “e-information,” which they define as the provision of relevant and timely online information to citizens. (United Nations, 2014, p. 63; United Nations, 2022, p. 199 ff.)

Level 2 – E-Engaging or E-Consultation (Consultation and Dialogue):

At the second level, a two-way exchange takes place between the government and the public. Government agencies actively solicit opinions, feedback, and suggestions from citizens, but retain the final decision-making authority. Macintosh describes this level as a government-led (top-down) initiative in which citizens are consulted on specific topics. (Macintosh, 2004, p. 3) Typical tools include online surveys, comment functions on government portals, digital hearing procedures, and moderated discussion forums. United Nations studies refer to this stage as e-consultation, defined as the involvement of the public in political debates and draft decisions through ICT. (United Nations, 2022, p. 200)

Stage 3 – E-Empowering (Co-decision-making and Empowerment):

The highest stage goes beyond consultation and empowers citizens to actively shape—and, in some cases, co-decide—political processes. Macintosh defines this as encompassing both government-sponsored and civil society-initiated (bottom-up) approaches, in which citizens and civil society organizations can set their own agendas and hold political decision-makers accountable. (Macintosh, 2004, p. 3) Typical instruments include participatory budgeting, participatory planning platforms, collaborative policy development, and digital petition systems with binding effect. The United Nations refers to this stage as e-decision-making, understood as an active partnership between government and citizens in the decision-making process.

As mentioned above, the three-stage model is conceptually based on Sherry Arnstein’s classic model of participation. In her “Ladder of Citizen Participation,” Arnstein distinguished eight levels of participation, which she divided into three main groups: non-participation (manipulation, therapy), degrees of tokenism (informing, consultation, placation), and degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217) Arnstein’s central argument is that participation without actual decision-making power does not constitute genuine citizen participation, but remains merely a symbolic gesture by those in power. (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216–224) The application of this fundamental idea to the digital realm by Macintosh and the United Nations makes it clear that technological possibilities alone do not guarantee a shift in decision-making power; the decisive factor remains the political will for genuine citizen participation.

Policy Areas

E-participation is applied in a wide range of policy areas and is not limited to a single sphere of government action. It is particularly widespread at the local level, as the proximity between citizens and concrete planning decisions is especially pronounced there. (AKDB, 2025; Höhn, 2019) Studies show that the overarching goal of most local e-participation formats, regardless of the specific topic, is to increase the transparency of political decision-making processes. (Forschungsgruppe Lokale Partizipation, 2026)

The most prominent policy area is **urban and spatial planning**. Digital participation platforms are used to involve citizens in zoning procedures (Digitalzentrum Bau, n.d.), transportation planning, housing projects, and the design of public spaces. A prime example of this is the Hamburg project “FindingPlaces” (City Science Lab der HafenCity Universität Hamburg, n.d., p. 1–2), in which interactive digital city models (so-called CityScopes) were used in cooperation with the MIT Media Lab to involve citizens in the search for suitable sites for housing refugees. Similar approaches have been examined in Baltic cities, where ICT-supported participatory methods have been tested in municipal planning. (Akmentina, 2023, p. 624–657)

Another key policy area is **climate and environmental protection**. According to a recent study (2026), traffic development, climate protection, and noise action plans are the dominant topics in digital citizen participation formats in major German cities. (Forschungsgruppe Lokale Partizipation, 2026) Digital platforms make it possible to involve citizens in the development of municipal climate protection strategies or the planning of green spaces, as they offer low-threshold forms of participation that are independent of location and time.

E-participation is also gaining importance in the areas of **public health and healthy urban development**. The Healthy Cities movement emphasises that public participation and cross-sectoral collaboration are crucial for creating sustainable and equitable cities. Digital technologies expand the possibilities for interaction between residents and planners and open up both one-way and two-way forms of communication; however, complementary analog formats, such as workshops, remain necessary for deeper participation involving the joint development of solutions. (Shrestha, Hasselder & Bolte, 2024, p. 316–323)

Furthermore, e-participation is used in the area of **municipal budget planning** (participatory budgeting or digital participatory budgeting (AKDB, 2025)), where citizens can submit proposals online regarding the use of public funds and vote on priorities. (Höhn, 2019; Le Blanc, 2020, p. 9 ff.) In addition, digital participation formats are applied at the municipal level in the areas of defect management (Maerker Brandenburg, n.d.) and infrastructure development (Fixmycity, n.d.). Overall, these examples demonstrate that while e-participation is widely applied across various topics, its actual effectiveness depends heavily on the political will of the respective institution to grant citizens genuine opportunities for co-determination.

Formal, Informal, and Financial (Digital) Participation in the EU, Germany, France and cross-border

Citizen participation can be broadly divided into three categories: formal, informal, and financial participation. This distinction is fundamental for both analog and digital forms of participation and provides the framework for classifying the respective country-specific instruments.

Formal citizen participation

Formal citizen participation refers to all forms of political participation that are enshrined in law and proceed according to clearly defined legal rules, deadlines, and procedures. Citizen participation takes place within the framework of prescribed participation rights and obligations, and the state is required to formally consider or respond to the results. (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, n.d.) Formal participation procedures are often primarily aimed at those directly affected, follow established quorums, and have a legally binding or at least legally recognised effect.

European Union

At the EU level, citizens have access to several formally established tools through which they can participate in European policymaking.

Public consultations by the European Commission are a key instrument of EU citizen participation. The European Commission is required to conduct an open public consultation when drafting new legislation and policy initiatives. This typically takes place via the “Have Your Say” online platform, which enables low-threshold, digital participation by all EU citizens. (European Commission, n.d.-b)

European Commission Green Papers are consultation documents that the Commission publishes on a specific policy area (also on the “Have Your Say” platform (European Commission, n.d.-b)) to spark a broad debate among citizens, institutions, and interest groups. They constitute a formal invitation to comment and often serve as a preliminary step toward concrete legislative proposals, which are subsequently described in white papers. (European Commission, n.d.-a)

The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI), as set forth in Article 11(4) TEU, Article 24(1) TFEU, and Regulations (EU) No. 211/2011 and (EU) 2019/788, is the only instrument of direct democracy at the EU level. (European Parliament, n.d.) It enables a transnational group of at least one million citizens from at least seven Member States to formally request that the European Commission submit a legislative proposal. (European Citizens’ Initiative, n.d.) The ECI is considered one of the most important institutional innovations in European democracy, as it enables, for the first time, the direct participation of citizens in the European legislative process. (Bouza García, Cuesta-López, Mincheva & Szeligowska, 2012, p. 2) Critics note that, in practice, the ECI is used more by organized

civil society with transnational networks than by individual citizens; furthermore, a successful ECI does not guarantee a binding legislative response from the Commission. (Hinz, 2018, p. 5–6; Cuesta-López, 2012, p. 5–6)

Germany – federal state Level (Baden-Wuerttemberg)

At the state level, the Constitution of Baden-Württemberg (Verfassung des Landes Baden-Württemberg, Art. 59) has provided for instruments of direct democracy since 1952, which were strengthened in 2015 by a constitutional amendment. (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-b)

The petition for a referendum (*Volksbegehren*) is a three-stage process of direct popular legislation at the federal state level. To file an application for approval, at least 10,000 signatures from eligible voters are initially required; for the actual referendum, at least one-tenth of eligible voters in Baden-Württemberg must then sign the initiative. Once this hurdle is cleared, the state parliament is obligated to consider the draft bill. In addition, the 2015 constitutional reform introduced the citizens' petition (*Volksatrag*): This requires only approximately 39,000 signatures (0.5% of eligible voters) within 12 months and can be submitted on any topic within the state parliament's purview. (Beteiligungsportal Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-c) Digital participation in the referendum via online signature is not yet legally possible; however, the State Councilor for Digitalization continues to push for a corresponding legislative amendment. (Stuttgarter Zeitung, 2025)

The referendum (*Volksabstimmung*) is the final stage of the process and takes place if the state parliament does not approve a referendum as submitted. The law is considered adopted if a majority of voters approve it and at least 20% of all eligible voters have voted "yes." (Beteiligungsportal Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-c)

France – Regional Level

Since its constitutional enshrinement in 2003 (Constitution française, Art. 72-1; Code général des collectivités territoriales, Arts. LO1112-1 to LO1112-14-2, R1112-1 to R1112-17), **the Référendum local** (local decision-making referendum) has been the only instrument in France that grants citizens binding decision-making authority at the municipal and regional levels outside of election periods. (Magni-Berton & Premat, 2026) It allows the municipal council to submit certain municipal decisions to a direct vote by citizens. For the result to be binding, at least half of eligible voters must have cast a ballot, and a majority of the votes cast must be in favor of the decision; otherwise, the result is merely consultative. (Code général des collectivités territoriales, Art. LO1112-7; Magni-Berton & Premat, 2026) In practice, however, this instrument is rarely used, as the costs of organization and financing must be borne entirely by the respective local authority. (Code général des collectivités territoriales, Art. LO1112-5; Magni-Berton & Premat, 2026)

The Regional Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (*Conseil Économique, Social et Environnemental Régional CESER*) is a formal advisory body at the regional level that has existed in its current form since 1972 and has also held environmental responsibilities

since 2010. (CESER de France, n.d.) The CESER of the Grand Est region, formed in 2016 through the merger of the CESERs of the former regions of Alsace, Champagne-Ardenne, and Lorraine, is the region's second regional assembly and is composed of representatives of organised civil society (businesses, trade unions, associations, public figures), (CESER Grand Est, n.d.; Code général des collectivités territoriales, Art. R4134-1) who are appointed for six years by prefectural decree. (Code général des collectivités territoriales, Art. R4134-6) The CESER must be consulted on draft budgets, regional planning documents, and framework programs; in addition, it may be consulted by the Regional President on any regional issues and may also address topics it considers strategic. (Code général des collectivités territoriales, Art. L4241-1) As an advisory body, the CESER does not make binding decisions, but is regarded as an indispensable partner in shaping regional policy and as an expression of participatory dialogue in the Grand Est region. (République française, 2023)

Cross-border level

The **Treaty of Aachen** (*Traité d'Aix-la-Chapelle*) entered into force on January 22, 2020, and is the currently valid bilateral framework agreement for Franco-German cooperation. It is intended to replace the Élysée Treaty of 1963, and its fourth main section is explicitly dedicated to regional and cross-border cooperation. Of particular relevance to citizen participation are Article 12 (Franco-German Citizens' Fund for the promotion of citizens' initiatives and town twinning), Article 13 (promotion of relations between citizens, the role of local authorities and other local actors in implementing cross-border projects, targeted funding to overcome obstacles in the implementation of cross-border projects, and the adoption of legal and administrative provisions, including exemptions).

The **Franco-German Citizens' Fund** (*Deutsch-Französische Bürgerfonds*) established in April 2020, which emerged from Article 12, specifically supports Franco-German civil society projects and citizens' initiatives, thereby serving as a formally established instrument of cross-border citizen participation. (Deutsch-Französischer Bürgerfonds, n.d.-b)

Informal citizen participation

Informal citizen participation refers to all forms of political engagement that are not required by law, (Beteiligungsportal Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-a) which is why it is also called voluntary citizen participation. (Beteiligen Sachsen, n.d.) These initiatives are usually launched voluntarily by politicians, government agencies, or civil society itself and can be freely designed in terms of their selection, structure, and timing. (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-a) Its key advantage over formal procedures lies in its flexibility: Informal participation can begin early on, even before statutory procedures are initiated, and can include a broader range of people, including those not directly affected. It is strongly dialogue-oriented and aims to enable citizens and decision-

makers to exchange arguments and develop solutions together, with the administration often assuming a moderating, neutral role. (Beteiligungsportal Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-a; Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-a)

Common forms of informal citizen participation (Beteiligungsportal Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-a; Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-a) include:

- **Citizen forums and citizen dialogues:** open discussion formats in which citizens discuss specific local or political issues.
- **Citizen councils and citizen expert panels:** groups composed of randomly selected or representative members who develop recommendations on political issues.
- **Future workshops and planning cells:** structured participation formats for the collaborative development of potential solutions.
- **Online platforms and digital consultations** (e.g., *Baden-Württemberg Beteiligungsportal* (Beteiligungsportal Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-b), adhocracy+ (Adhocracy+, n.d.)): low-barrier digital participation tools through which proposals can be submitted, commented on, and evaluated.
- **Citizen panels:** opinion research tools at the local level designed to engage citizens who are not yet active in civic life.

Adherence to quality criteria is crucial for the legitimacy of informal procedures; these include fairness, transparency, autonomy in opinion-forming, and the traceability of how participation results are taken into account. (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg, n.d.-a)

Financial citizen participation

Financial citizen participation refers to forms of political and social participation in which citizens contribute not only substantively but also financially to projects or public decision-making processes. It combines civic engagement with economic participation and takes two main forms in local and regional contexts. (Lenk, Rottmann, Grüttner & Albrecht, 2013, p. 23)

Participatory **budgeting** is the best-known form of financial citizen participation in the public sector. First tested in 1989 in Porto Alegre (Brazil), it allows citizens to submit proposals for the use of municipal budget funds and vote on priorities; in many municipalities, this is now done via digital participation platforms. Since the term “participatory budgeting” has become an umbrella term for various procedures, the actual opportunities for citizen participation vary greatly from municipality to municipality. (Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik, 2023)

Citizen financing and crowdfunding represent another dimension of financial citizen participation, in which private small investors or citizens co-finance municipal projects—for example, in the areas of urban development, renewable energy, or infrastructure—through loans, equity investments, or donations. This financial participation fosters a special sense of identification with the project, which strengthens its public perception and social acceptance. (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Innenentwicklung, n.d.) In the German context, the concept of financial civic participation is also frequently used in connection with energy cooperatives and the energy transition, in which citizens become co-owners of energy generation facilities and thus acquire not only a financial return but also co-determination rights. (Kahla & Maly, 2022, p. 9–16)

Analysis of cross-border platform examples or participatory approaches in border regions

Cross-border German-French platforms in the Upper Rhine region

In the Upper Rhine region, there is a multitude of cross-border institutions and digital offerings that address citizens. The vast majority of these operate at the lower levels of e-participation according to Macintosh (Macintosh, 2004, p. 2–3), that is, at the level of e-information (Level 1) or, at most, e-consultation (Level 2), and are predominantly informal in nature. Only the Franco-German Citizens’ Fund represents a formally established instrument with active participatory potential.

The following analysis consistently applies the analytical framework developed in the previous chapters (level and type of (e-)participation) to all institutions examined in order to enable a comparable assessment.

Institution / Platform	Type	E-participation level	Service / Function
FRED.info (FRED.info, n.d.)	Informal, digital	Level 1 – E-Information	First bilingual German-French citizen portal (BW / Grand Est, since March 2023); aggregates institutions, events, current topics, everyday information, funding opportunities; no consultation or participation mechanism
Infobest (INFOBEST, n.d.)	Informal-institutional, analog + digital	Level 1 – E-Information	Four bi/trilateral advisory centers in the Upper Rhine region; over 24,000 inquiries annually; since 2024, also digital support for filling out online applications (INFOBEST 4.0); no citizen participation in the strict sense; citizen information

Institution / Platform	Type	E-participation level	Service / Function
Committee for Cross-Border Cooperation (AGZ) (Ausschuss für grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit, n.d.)	Formal, institutional	Level 1 – E-Information	Operational since January 2021; connects national and regional representatives from both countries; addresses everyday barriers faced by the border population; no direct citizen participation structure
Eurodistricts: Strasbourg-Ortenau (Eurodistrict Strasbourg-Ortenau, n.d.) PAMINA (Eurodistrict PAMINA, n.d.) Basel (Trinationaler Eurodistrict Basel, n.d.) Freiburg Region – Central and Southern Alsace (Eurodistrict Region Freiburg – Centre et Sud Alsace, n.d.)	Informal-institutional	Level 1–2 – E-Information + E-Consultation	Digital platform for networking cross-border stakeholders; online voting; Eurodistrict Convention as a citizen dialogue; limited commitment
Upper Rhine Conference (Oberrheinkonferenz, n.d.)	Formal-institutional	Level 1 – E-Information	Oldest political cooperation body in the Upper Rhine region (founded in 1975); brings together national and regional representatives from Germany, France, and Switzerland; website provides specialised information on 12 working groups (climate protection, health, disaster relief, etc.); primarily aimed at institutional actors, no citizen participation in the strict sense

Institution / Platform	Type	E-participation level	Service / Function
Trinational Upper Rhine Metropolitan Region (TMO) (Trinationale Metropolregion Oberrhein, n.d.)	Formal-institutional	Level 1 – E-Information	Umbrella organization for four pillars (politics, business, science, civil society); its own TMO Strategy 2030; no , no dedicated budget, no dedicated digital participation platform; civil society is structurally integrated as a pillar, but there is no direct citizen consultation or co-decision-making
RegioTriRhena (RegioTriRhena, n.d.)	Informal-institutional	Level 1 – E-Information	Coordinates projects in the economy, labor market, culture, and environment; website provides information on projects and networks, but does not offer digital participation opportunities for citizens
TRION-climate e.V. (TRION-climate e.V., n.d.)	Informal, expert stakeholders	Level 1 – E-Information	Trinational association (DE/FR/CH) (since 2015); network of approx. 100 members from the energy and climate sectors; no general opportunities for citizen participation
TRISAN (TRISAN, n.d.)	Informal-institutional, experts	Level 1 – E-Information	Trinational Competence Center for Health Cooperation (since 2016); primarily targets experts, informs citizens
Frontaliers Grand Est (Frontaliers Grand Est, n.d.)	Informal, digital	Level 1 – E-information	Legal information platform for cross-border workers; no opportunity for participation
German-French Citizens' Fund (Deutsch-Französischer Bürgerfonds, n.d.-a)	Formal/ financial, digital + institutional	Levels 1–2 – E-information + limited e-consultation	Civil society funding instrument; advises, networks, and finances projects; online applications accepted year-round; anchored in Art. 12 of the Treaty of Aachen

The overview shows that while the institutional landscape in the Upper Rhine region is dense and diverse, its digital dimension remains almost exclusively focused on providing information. INFOBEST and FRED.info fulfill important aggregation and orientation functions for the border population, but offer neither consultation nor co-decision mechanisms. TRION-climate and TRISAN are specialised platforms primarily aimed at

institutional actors and thus remain outside the scope of general citizen participation. Consequently, not a single instrument in the Upper Rhine region reaches Level 3 of e-participation (*e-empowering*) in the sense of political co-determination. The Franco-German Citizens' Fund, the region's only formally established civil society funding instrument, does enable financial citizen participation via a digital platform, but offers no influence on political or administrative decision-making processes. This structural gap between informative digitization and genuine digital co-creation is a central argument for the need for an independent cross-border citizen participation platform.

In addition to legal and institutional barriers, the persistently low level of participation in the instruments examined can also be explained by administrative culture. Using the Upper Rhine region as an example, Beck (Beck, 2022, p. 82–97) shows that Germany, France, and Switzerland differ significantly in key administrative cultural dimensions, such as communication style, power distance, discourse and problem-solving orientation which structurally complicates cooperation between the participating administrations. These differences not only affect interstate institutional cooperation but also shape how easily digital participation formats can be jointly designed and established across borders: A French, more centralised understanding of administration clashes with a German, federally fragmented system, each with its own expectations regarding formality, binding nature, and decision-making speed. According to Beck's contingency model (Beck, 2022, p. 98), the influence of administrative culture is not constant but varies depending on the policy area, degree of institutionalization, and type of actor: In the case of more formalised, cross-sectoral tasks involving low levels of mutual trust, as would typically be the case when establishing a new cross-border participation platform, the cultural influence is particularly high. This further explains why none of the instruments examined to date has gone beyond the level of simply providing e-information or limited e-consultation. Establishing a common, binding participatory structure requires not only legal adjustments but also overcoming well-established, nationally shaped administrative routines.

Common Ground – Robert Bosch Stiftung

A particularly relevant example is the “Common Ground – Shaping the Future Across Borders” program, which was funded by the Robert Bosch Stiftung from 2022 to 2025 during a pilot phase and coordinated and supported by the nexus Institute. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 1) The program funded eight cross-border projects in German border regions, including the project “R(h)einverbindlich / Liaisons rhénans Emmendingen / PETR Sélestat-Alsace Centrale” between Germany and France. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 3) The central objectives were to test cross-border deliberative participation processes, build capacity in politics and administration, and create sustainable participation structures in the border regions. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 1–2) Thus, Common Ground should be understood less as a technical single-platform solution and more as

an institutionally framed approach to developing cross-border participation architectures. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 15–16)

The evaluation documents specific challenges of cross-border participation, particularly language barriers, differing participation cultures, divergent legal frameworks, and asymmetrical administrative structures. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 3–4) These approaches demonstrate that border regions are increasingly viewed as autonomous spaces for democratic co-governance, yet they also show that operational implementation often remains project-based and is not consolidated into a unified digital portal. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 1)

Common Ground - R(h)einverbindlich / Liaisons rhénanes – Emmendingen District & PETR Sélestat-Alsace Centrale

The project “R(h)einverbindlich – Liaisons rhénanes” is one of eight cross-border regional projects funded by the Robert Bosch Stiftung’s Common Ground program and the only explicitly Franco-German project in the pilot phase. It was carried out from 2022 to 2025 jointly by the district of Emmendingen (Baden-Württemberg) and the French planning and local government association PETR Sélestat-Alsace Centrale, which are connected by the Rhine over a length of 18 kilometers. (Tebel-Haas, 2024)

The starting point and symbolic heart of the project was the Rhine island between Marckolsheim (F) and Sasbach (D), a former customs facility that had been abandoned for decades. (Robert Bosch Stiftung, n.d.-b) The project used this specific location as a starting point to facilitate cross-border citizen participation on four key themes: sustainable mobility, renewable energy, biodiversity, and healthy and local food. (PETR Sélestat-Alsace Centrale, n.d.)

In a total of 23 events—including three citizen forums, hands-on activities, bike trips to the Rhine island, climate brunches, landscape conservation days, and online surveys—over 1,100 citizens on both sides of the Rhine were actively involved. All formats were designed to be bilingual, and knowledge of the neighboring country’s language was explicitly not a prerequisite for participation. (Tebel-Haas, 2024) Depending on the format, the project ranges from Level 1 to the approach of Level 3 according to Macintosh (Macintosh, 2004, p. 2–3). Online surveys and informational events are classified as Level 1 – E-Information, as they involve one-way information dissemination or opinion polling without an obligation to provide feedback. The citizen forums for idea generation are classified as Level 2 – E-Consultation, as they involve consulting citizens on specific topics and incorporating the results directly into project design. Concrete proposals from citizens regarding project design, however, represent the beginning of Level 3. Citizens develop ideas intended for implementation, though without formal decision-making obligations.

The project revealed key areas of tension in cross-border citizen participation. On the French side, public institutions played a leading role, while on the German side, there was a greater reliance on volunteer engagement. Furthermore, it became apparent that, despite considerable efforts, a representative random selection of participants was difficult to achieve in Germany. (Robert Bosch Stiftung, n.d.-a)

In response to these challenges, the project increasingly relied on everyday, low-threshold formats—such as joint bike tours, climate brunches, and orchard maintenance—that make the European idea tangible and thus also reached citizens who had previously been less engaged. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 14; Robert Bosch Stiftung, n.d.-a)

The project is thus exemplary of a hybrid, location-based participatory approach: it combines digital (online surveys) and analog (citizen forums, participatory activities) formats, anchors participation in a specific symbolic location (PETR Sélestat-Alsace Centrale, n.d.) and links civil society initiatives with institutional anchoring in the local governments of both countries.

Challenges and Opportunities for a Cross-Border Citizen Participation Platform

Challenges

An analysis of existing approaches and platform examples makes it clear that cross-border digital citizen participation faces a specific set of challenges that go far beyond the general difficulties of national participation processes. As the scientific support for the Common Ground program notes, this amounts to “participation squared” (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 13 ff.): The familiar challenges of good participatory processes are multiplied in a cross-border context by language, culture, law, administration, and space.

Language and Communication

To enable equal participation, there simply must be no language barriers. While simultaneous translation at larger events is essential, it is expensive and resource-intensive; moreover, it can give the event the atmosphere of an international conference and become an additional barrier for target groups with limited educational backgrounds. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 5–7) The Common Ground evaluation also documents that internal project communication should take place in the local languages and not in English. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 5) For digital platforms, this necessitates a fully multilingual user interface—not as an optional add-on, but as

a structural prerequisite for participation, as exemplified by, the platforms Infobest (INFOBEST, n.d.), FRED.info (FRED.info, n.d.), the Franco-German Citizens' Fund (Deutsch-Französischer Bürgerfonds, n.d.-a), and many others.

Different Cultures of Participation

In addition to language, socio-cultural differences in participatory culture have a lasting impact on cross-border cooperation. In the Franco-German context of the Upper Rhine, it should be noted that while there has been an increase in deliberative participatory processes in France, political representatives still often perceive participation as a challenge to their democratic legitimacy. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 8) A cross-border platform must conceptually take these differing understandings of participation into account and offer low-threshold formats that are culturally accessible.

Different legal systems and administrative structures

Structural differences in legal frameworks—such as those governing data protection, environmental law, and land-use planning, as well as those pertaining to citizen participation itself—have a significant impact on cross-border participatory projects. In federal systems like those of Germany, Belgium, or Switzerland, regions and municipalities enjoy considerable autonomy in shaping policy, whereas in unitary states such as France, municipalities function primarily as administrative units. This has direct consequences for the binding nature of participation outcomes: ideas developed with citizens are not politically binding, and the likelihood that they will not be implemented increases if the issues fall outside the decision-making authority of the participating municipalities, districts, or regions. (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 9 ff.) In their comparative study on e-participation platforms in seven European countries, Randma-Liiv et al. (2022) point out that diffuse ownership structures and unclear responsibilities, particularly in multi-level governance contexts, are among the most common causes of failure for e-participation initiatives. (Randma-Liiv, 2022, p. 1037)

Sustainable citizen participation rather than a project-based approach

Cross-border citizen participation in Europe has so far taken place predominantly within the framework of time-limited funding projects. Where digital participation portals exist, they are designed for the short term and lack institutional coherence; they represent fragmented, isolated solutions that neither build on one another nor can develop a shared user base. For citizens, this means: engagement is hardly worthwhile if the platform goes offline once the project ends and the proposals developed remain without an institutional home.

A credible cross-border citizen participation platform must therefore be permanently institutionalised with clear sponsorship, secure funding, and defined responsibilities on both sides of the border. Only in this way can participation evolve from an exceptional state to a democratic norm in the border region.

Trust, Commitment, and the Risk of Tokenism

A lack of political commitment and uncertainty regarding how to handle participation outcomes are general challenges that are amplified in a cross-border context: Since the involvement of multiple countries multiplies responsibilities, authorities, and levels within politics and administration, citizens' commitment and trust tend to diminish. The Interreg Europe Policy Brief by Morisson and Ferrario identifies the risk of tokenism, that is, symbolic participation without genuine influence on decisions, as one of the central threats to trust in participatory processes. (Morisson & Ferrario, 2025, p. 6) Successful participation must therefore ensure that citizen contributions are actually incorporated into decisions and that this connection is communicated transparently.

Reaching Target Groups and Digital Inequality

Marginalised groups face multiple barriers to access: language, the digital divide, and logistical constraints overlap. The Common Ground accompanying research succinctly summarises this: "For cross-border participation, especially at our border, practically everyone is hard to reach." (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 13 ff.; Morisson & Ferrario, 2025, p. 12) For a digital platform, this means that exclusively digital formats have a structurally exclusionary effect and that hybrid participation options are indispensable.

Methodological Approach: Form Follows Function

The aim of the following design proposals is to further develop cross-border citizen participation in the Upper Rhine region beyond the currently dominant Level 1 (E-Information) and move toward Level 3 (E-Empowering), that is, toward formats that enable citizens to have a genuine say and political empowerment. As the preceding analysis has shown, nearly all institutional offerings in the region remain at the level of information provision or, at best, selective consultation, without citizen contributions having a binding effect on political decisions. A shift is needed from informal information to formal consultation and joint decision-making.

Methodologically, the design proposals follow the principle of "form follows function": rather than starting from existing legal frameworks and deriving what is possible from them, the first step is to ask, from a functional perspective, what specific participatory functions a cross-border portal would need to fulfil in order to meet the requirements of inclusive, multilingual, and politically effective citizen participation. Only in a second step is it examined which of these functions can be realised within existing legal systems, German, French, and European law, and where, if necessary, legal adjustments, bilateral or

multilateral agreements, or new institutional foundations would be required. This approach has the advantage that it is not constrained from the outset by legal path dependencies, but rather takes what is desirable from a democratic perspective as its starting point and treats legal feasibility as a subsequent, yet necessary, condition.

Functional and Content-Related Design Options

Multilingual infrastructure: The platform must be designed as a fully multilingual system, at a minimum in German and French. Machine translation tools can be used as a supplement, but they do not replace human editing of multilingual content. Models such as FRED.info demonstrate that such an approach is technically feasible but requires institutional maintenance.

Hybrid participation formats: The Interreg Europe Policy Brief explicitly recommends prioritising hybrid formats that combine traditional in-person consultations with innovative digital tools to reach a broader audience. (Morisson & Ferrario, 2025, p. 6) A platform that is accessible exclusively online cannot guarantee inclusive cross-border participation. Rather, it should function as a digital infrastructure for hybrid processes: online idea submission and voting as preparation for in-person formats, location-based mapping features, and digital recording of in-person events.

Early political engagement and clear feedback mechanisms: Political engagement and the early involvement of all relevant bodies are crucial for cross-border participation. For a platform, this means that every opportunity for participation must be linked to a clearly communicated feedback mechanism that shows how citizen contributions have been incorporated into decisions; otherwise, there is a risk of losing trust.

Possible areas of cross-border citizen participation:

Type of participation	Topic area / Example in the Upper Rhine region	Level of e-participation	Type of participation	Note
Cross-border petition / citizens' initiative	Cross-border commuter issues, infrastructure projects, environmental protection	Level 3 – E-Empowering	Formal	Comparable to the European Citizens' Initiative; requires an addressee with decision-making authority

Type of participation	Topic area / Example in the Upper Rhine region	Level of e-participation	Type of participation	Note
Online consultation on land use planning / urban planning	Cross-border zoning plans, agglomeration programs	Level 2 – E-Consultation	Formal	Already provided for in national legal systems; legally complex at the cross-border level (based on the Espoo Convention)
Participatory budgeting / citizen's budget	Joint micro-project fund for border municipalities, continuation of the Franco-German citizens' fund approach	Stage 3 – E-Empowering	Financial	Citizens' funds as an institutional model
Cross-border citizens' assemblies	Climate protection in the Upper Rhine region, healthcare, mobility	Stage 3 – E-Empowering	Informal	Model: French Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (CESER)
Online platform for ideas and suggestions	Everyday problems in the border region (explain your obstacle), local suggestions for improvement	Levels 2–3 – E-Consultation / E-Empowering	Informal	No obligation to provide feedback; only Stage 2
Environmental impact assessment with public participation	Cross-border infrastructure, industrial projects (e.g., power plants, landfills)	Stage 2 – E-Consultation	Formal	Already regulated by the Espoo Convention (1991) and the EIA Directive (2014/52/EU); expansion to e-consultation possible
Local Agenda / Sustainability Participation	Cross-border climate strategies, TRION-climate topics	Stage 2 – E-consultation	Informal	Model: Local Agenda 21 (Kuhn, 1998); can be enhanced digitally via map functions and comment tools

Type of participation	Topic area / Example in the Upper Rhine region	Level of e-participation	Type of participation	Note
Cross-border urban development / citizen participation in planning processes	Eurodistricts	Level 2 – E-Consultation	Formal / Informal	Formal citizen participation in urban planning procedures regulated differently in Germany and France; informal formats easier to implement
Student participation / Youth participation	Cross-border school projects, DFJW programs	Level 2–33 – E-Consultation / E-Empowering	Informal	Low-threshold, particularly suitable as an entry-level format for a cross-border platform
Cross-border town hall meetings (hybrid)	Cross-border commuters, border communities, Eurodistricts	Level 2–3 – E-Consultation / E-Empowering	Informal	Hybrid implementation (in-person + digital) as a best practice from Common Ground
Citizens' petition / referendum (adapted)	Cross-border issues with sufficient signatories	Stage 3 – E-Empowering	Formal	Legally complex: different thresholds and effects in Germany and France; long-term option
Statement on cross-border funding programs	Participation in Interreg programs, Cohesion Fund	Stage 1–2 – E-Information / E-Consultation	Formal	EU partnership principle (Art. 8 Framework Regulation 2021/1060) requires civil society participation, but is rarely accessible digitally
Cross-border citizen reporters / participatory journalism	Documentation of everyday problems in the border region (e.g., FRED.info supplement, explain your obstacle)	Level 1–2	Informal	Low-threshold, trust-building, feasible without a legal basis

Legal options

The legal feasibility of a cross-border citizen participation platform depends crucially on which normative foundations already exist, where gaps exist, and which legislative adjustments would be conceivable in the short to medium term. The following analysis follows the “form follows function” approach outlined in the previous section: It examines which legal instruments enable the functionally necessary participation formats and highlights where further legal reforms are necessary.

The central bilateral legal framework for a Franco-German citizen participation platform is the Treaty of Aachen.

Article 12 obligates both countries to establish a joint citizens’ fund intended to promote citizens’ initiatives and city partnerships aimed at bringing the two peoples closer together. This fund has since been institutionalised as the Franco-German Citizens’ Fund and operates via a digital application platform. However, as outlined in Chapter 4, it does not constitute an instrument of political citizen participation but should be understood as a funding instrument for civil society initiatives.

Article 13 is the decisive legal basis for a more comprehensive cross-border citizen participation framework. Paragraph 1 contains a political commitment to strengthening cross-border cooperation with an explicit focus on simplifying the daily lives of border residents. Particularly significant is paragraph 2, which explicitly assigns local authorities and cross-border institutions such as Eurodistricts appropriate powers, resources, and expedited procedures for the implementation of cross-border projects, and as a last resort even opens the possibility of adapted legislation, including exemptions. Amending the legal bases for cross-border consultations in the respective specific sectoral laws using the tools of cross-border-friendly legislation would be a solution.

These so-called experimental and opening clauses and mutual recognition (Berrod & Frey, n.d., p. 47 ff.) could provide a solution for the legal framework of a cross-border digital citizen participation platform: they allow for the creation of deviating legal solutions for the border region, to the extent permitted by national constitutional orders and EU law. (Frey & Herrmann, 2023, p. 78) In this context, France has already established a constitutional experimental clause through Articles 37-1 and 72 of the Constitution (introduced by the *Loi 3DS*), which permits regional deviations from national standards. (Conseil d’État, 2019, p. 10)

While this example shows that experimental opening clauses can be enshrined in law, the mere constitutional possibility does not guarantee practical implementation. The “form follows function” principle advocated here assumes that the legal framework for cross-border participation procedures must be aligned with democratically desirable functions, not the other way around. However, this normative starting point must not obscure the fact that existing legal frameworks themselves are the result of established institutional practices and political negotiation processes. Adapting form to function is therefore not a purely technical process but encounters structural resistance: Germany and France differ

not only in their federal and centralised administrative architectures, respectively, but also in their legal traditions regarding the codification of citizen participation. Opening clauses and the mutual recognition of participation procedures therefore require not only the political will to reform, but also a willingness to renegotiate established divisions of authority between the federal government, the states, the nation, and the regions, a process whose complexity is already evident from the many years it took to negotiate the Treaty of Aachen itself.

This critique can be theoretically grounded by drawing on Beck's concept of 'horizontal subsidiarity'. (Beck, 2022, p.119–124) Beck argues that the principle of subsidiarity in the European integration debate is almost exclusively understood vertically, as the relationship between the EU, national, and regional levels under Art. 5(3) TEU. Yet it originally carries a horizontal dimension: the smaller, more specialised unit should take precedence over the larger unit if it can perform a given task equally well or better. Applied to the cross-border context, this implies that the 'smaller unit' (such as a cross-border participation platform) should take precedence over the national 'parent systems' where it can resolve a cross-border task more effectively than separate national handling. Horizontal subsidiarity thus provides a normative framework that legitimises opening clauses and mutual recognition not merely as pragmatic administrative tools, but as the expression of a coherent subsidiarity-based principle. Notably, Beck himself points out that these considerations were already taken up by the German and French legislators in the Treaty of Aachen form 2019, underscoring the compatibility of this concept with the existing legal architecture of Franco-German cooperation. At the same time, Beck stresses that horizontal subsidiarity presupposes that the smaller unit is institutionally, materially, and functionally equipped to actually perform the task. A condition that, in the case of a newly established cross-border participation platform in the Upper Rhine region, would still need to be met.

Since an in-depth empirical examination of these negotiation dynamics is not the focus of this thesis, this aspect is identified in the conclusion and outlook as a topic for future research.

Conclusion and Outlook

This paper has examined how a digital cross-border citizen participation platform for the Upper Rhine region could be designed and what legal, institutional, and functional conditions must be met for this. The analysis has shown that the prerequisites for this are both promising and structurally challenging.

At the conceptual level, Macintosh's three-stage model of e-participation provides the decisive framework: cross-border citizen participation in the Upper Rhine region has so far taken place almost exclusively at Stage 1 (e-information). The analysis of the institutional landscape, from FRED.info to INFOBEST and the Eurodistricts, all the way to the Trinational Upper Rhine Metropolitan Region, has made it clear that not a

single existing instrument enables politically effective co-determination in the sense of Level 3 (e-empowering). The structural gap between informative digitization and genuine democratic co-determination is thus the central finding of the platform analysis.

The Robert Bosch Stiftung's Common Ground program, and in particular the R(h) einverbindlich / Liaisons rhénanes project between the district of Emmendingen and the PETR Sélestat-Alsace Centrale, simultaneously demonstrate that cross-border deliberative participation is practically possible, albeit so far in a project-based, time-limited, and institutionally non-permanent manner. Overcoming precisely this boundary between a valuable model project and a sustainable participatory architecture is the actual task at hand.

The challenge analysis has made it clear that technical functionality alone is not enough. Language, differing cultures of participation, asymmetrical administrative structures, the risk of tokenism, and the difficulty of reaching target groups multiply in a cross-border context to create "participation squared" (Robert Bosch Stiftung & com.X – Institut für Kommunikation und Management, 2025, p. 13 ff.). This reveals a fundamental insight that extends beyond the Upper Rhine region: Digital cross-border citizen participation cannot simply mirror national participation models or be transferred to the border region. Instead, it requires hybrid formats, that combine formal, legally binding procedures with low-threshold, informal mechanisms, thereby enabling broader, more inclusive participation by the population on both sides of the border. Practice to date in the Upper Rhine region has shown that formal instruments alone are too rigid and informal approaches alone too non-binding to ensure sustainable democratic co-determination. Only their targeted combination creates the conditions for citizen participation that goes beyond symbolic involvement.

Legally, the Treaty of Aachen—in particular Article 13(2) with its experimental and opening clause—and the French Constitutional Articles 37-1 and 72 introduced by the *Loi 3DS* provide a robust, albeit as yet unused, legal basis for cross-border deviations from national law.

Two conclusions can be drawn for further research and practical discourse:

First, platform development should follow the "form follows function" principle: functional requirements such as multilingualism, hybrid formats, transparent feedback, and local intermediaries must determine the design, rather than the available legal frameworks restricting what is functionally possible. Specifically, this means making formal participation procedures—such as consultations on spatial planning and infrastructure projects—digitally accessible, while simultaneously integrating informal formats like participatory budgeting, idea and petition platforms, and location-based participatory features as two complementary, non-competing channels for participation.

Second, cross-border citizen participation requires political will at the national level, which has been lacking thus far. Arnstein's fundamental insight from 1969 remains unchanged in the cross-border digital space: participation without actual decision-making power remains a symbolic gesture. (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216–224) The legal instruments

of the Treaty of Aachen and the democratic potential of the Upper Rhine region are in place; what is missing is their consistent activation by political leaders on both sides of the border.

Third, it remains to be seen how the “form follows function” principle advocated here can prevail against the inertia of existing legal traditions. Further research is needed, in particular, regarding the political and administrative resistance that stands in the way of adapting the legal framework to participatory functions that are desirable from a democratic perspective. Empirical studies, for example, based on expert interviews with stakeholders in the Franco-German legislative process within ministries and parliamentary administrations, could provide deeper insights into the specific dynamics of negotiation and thus provide an empirical foundation for the normative arguments presented in this thesis.

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Strengthening Language Skills of Cross-Border Actors

The Example of Tandem Language Courses Applied to Professional Practice

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Abstract

Cross-border cooperation in the Upper Rhine Region, which includes parts of Germany, France and Switzerland, has a long tradition, dating back to the 1960s. It is a dynamic form of cooperation that operates at various levels, for example at the political and administrative levels, but also between businesses and universities. Numerous networks, often arising from INTERREG projects, exist. Over the last few years, exchanges between citizens, stimulated by cross-border dialogues or citizens' councils, have become increasingly important. Despite this long-standing cross-border practice, there are sometimes obstacles that make cooperation more difficult. Among the obstacles cited, the language barrier is frequently mentioned. Despite the existing proximity, plurilingualism among residents, and also among administrative staff, is not a given. Research and practical experience show that language and culture are closely linked. The tandem language learning method, which is applied at the Euro-Institut with a focus on professional practice, takes this link into account. This paper aims on the one hand to provide a scientifically sound overview of the tandem method, a language learning method that focuses on interaction between learners, and on the other hand to verify the hypothesis that the tandem method is appropriate for cross-border staff.

Keywords: Cross-Border Cooperation, Cross-Border Staff, Plurilingualism, Language, Culture, Tandem Method

Introduction

The Upper Rhine Region is a trinational region with a long history of cross-border cooperation. The region includes Baden in the South-West of Germany, Alsace in France, a part of Palatinate as well as cantons of North-Western Switzerland.

Cross-border cooperation in the Upper Rhine Region has a long tradition, dating back to the 1960s. It is a dynamic form of cooperation that operates at various levels, for example at the political and administrative levels, but also between businesses and universities. Numerous networks, often arising from INTERREG projects, exist. Over the last few years, exchanges between citizens, stimulated by cross-border dialogues or citizens'

councils, have become increasingly important. Despite this long-standing cross-border practice, there are sometimes obstacles that make cooperation more difficult. Among the obstacles cited, the language barrier is frequently mentioned (Bonnafous, 2021).

Despite the existing proximity, plurilingualism among residents, and also among administrative staff, is not a given. What approaches might be possible to strengthen language skills in the border region? Research and practical experience show that language and culture are closely linked. The tandem language learning method, which is applied at the Euro-Institut with a focus on professional practice, takes this link into account. This fact, together with the consideration of some other methodological and organisational features that will be explained, allows the deduction that the method is particularly well suited to those involved in cross-border cooperation. This paper aims on the one hand to provide a scientifically sound overview of the tandem method, a language learning method that focuses on active interaction between learners, and on the other hand to verify the hypothesis that the tandem method is appropriate for cross-border staff. To this end, the author refers to the relevant literature and draws on her own experience of applying the method at the Euro-Institut. Written evaluations by learners are also analysed.

Chapter 2 will consider the current situation in the Upper Rhine Region as far as plurilingualism is concerned and is furthermore dedicated to the benefits of language skills for cross-border actors and the connections between language and culture. This analysis will help to identify the characteristics needed for a language learning method that fits to the challenges of cross-border cooperation. Chapter 3 describes the tandem method with its history and its original features. Then, in chapter 4 we will explain how the method has been adapted to the needs of professional staff in cross-border cooperation. Chapter 5 examines the outcomes of tandem language courses for learners.

In our use of the terms ‘plurilingualism’ and ‘multilingualism’, we refer to the definition provided by the Council of Europe: *“Plurilingualism is the ability to use more than one language – and accordingly sees languages from the standpoint of speakers and learners. Multilingualism, on the other hand, refers to the presence of several languages in a given geographical area, regardless of those who speak them.”* (Beacco et al. 2016)

When the term “own language” is used in the text, it refers to the language that learners primarily use in their everyday environment and for which they act as role models in the tandem language course. This will usually be their first language or native language.

When we mention face-to-face courses as a part of our “cross-border tandem method”, we refer to courses that are held on site. Online courses are perfectly possible and are indeed organised, but they are not specifically dealt with in this paper.

Plurilingualism in a border region, taking the example of the Upper Rhine region

Before considering the cross-border space of the Upper Rhine Region, we should introduce some numbers that show, in general, the importance of cross-border regions in Europe. Actually 40% of the EU territory are border regions. According to Eurostat, border regions in the European Union are “those regions with a land border, or those regions where more than half of the population lives within 25 km of such a border.” (Eurostat, Glossary). This concerns 30% of the EU population, which means about 150 million people. It therefore stands to reason that the living conditions on the border are by no means a marginal phenomenon. It is a fact that these living conditions are not the same as in the central region of a country. We often have rural regions, whereas the economic centres are located in conurbations, which are often easier to reach. But also as far as services, education or cultural initiatives are concerned, border regions are disadvantaged, simply because people’s lives are often confined to a field of view of 180 degrees rather than the 360 degrees one would normally expect. Expanding this view, with all the possibilities linked to it, is one of the main purposes of cross-border cooperation.

Border regions are often regarded as real-world laboratories for European integration. It is in these areas that solutions to border obstacles are developed and tested, for example in fields such as education, citizen participation or labour mobility.

The current situation regarding plurilingualism in the Upper Rhine region

The field of labour mobility is a very important issue for cross-border cooperation. All over the European Union, there are nearly 2 million commuters who cross the border daily to reach their workplace; in the Upper Rhine region there are about 100,000 commuters who cross the borders between France, Germany and Switzerland. Of course, for all these persons an institutional cross-border support is needed and is provided.

In the German-French-Swiss Upper Rhine region, cross-border cooperation has a long tradition that has been steadily developing since the 1960s. Besides cooperation between administrations and other institutions, there are numerous projects which often create durable networks. Furthermore, the region offers numerous cross-border institutions, i.e. organisations that are supported by institutions from the two or three countries and sometimes have a specific cross-border or European legal form. The languages used in the context of cross-border cooperation are French and German. The Swiss cantons concerned are in the North-West of the country and are German-speaking. So, how do we deal with the two languages? The not so clear answer is: it depends.

In the three country parts forming the Upper Rhine Region, language skills concerning the neighbouring language are declining. The situation is better than in other parts of the concerned countries, but we clearly see that there are less language competences nowadays than some years ago. If we look at the Alsatian part, the situation is not so bad. A survey realised in Alsace (*Etude sociolinguistique sur l’alsacien et l’allemand*, 2022) shows that 54% of

the respondents say, that they speak German very well or quite well. It is important to know that 41% of the sample were aged 55 and more. 30% of the respondents were already retired. In Baden-Württemberg (Germany), we also note a decline of French learners. Currently, only 24.3% of them learn the neighbouring language (Destatis, Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). Four languages are spoken in Switzerland: German, French, Italian and Romansh. So, Switzerland is a typical example for a multilingual country which means that several languages are spoken by different groups of the population. As far as the North-Western cantons are concerned, the language used is German; in spoken language, however, it is an Alemannic dialect.

Having considered the general linguistic situation, we will now turn our attention to language use in the context of cross-border cooperation and cross-border contacts.

As a matter of fact, there is a certain “cross-border community”, which means actors who work regularly with partners from the neighbour countries, that does not have any language problems. This group of experts is plurilingual, because communication with the partners from abroad is part of their job. We are talking here about policy officers for international cooperation in local or regional administration or those experts who work at cross-border institutions. This is a group for which crossing the border and work with their colleagues from the neighbour country is not a significant issue because it happens very often. Consequently, there are no communication problems, and meetings are often held by using two languages. They often use a technique which is called passive language competence i.e. everyone uses his or her own language and is perfectly able to understand the neighbouring language, or a group chooses, not always consciously, the language that is the easiest for everyone.

Difficulties can be noticed within temporary projects, but also in the context of labour mobility and meetings between pupils or citizens. Also, in institutional meetings, the participants sometimes do not have enough language competences to express themselves in the neighbouring language or to understand the colleagues from the neighbour countries. In such situations, interpretation is usually used.

Undoubtedly, the language barrier still exists and, moreover, is frequently cited as an obstacle to cross-border cooperation.

The benefits of language skills for cross-border actors and professional staff

Yet, plurilingualism is an important political and institutional topic in the Upper Rhine Region. Especially when citizens are asked which obstacles they see for a more intense cross-border cooperation, they very often mention the so-called language barrier. And the political and institutional levels do hear them. So, “bilingualism”, which is the term frequently used, is mentioned in several treaties, and at the local and regional level, efforts are made in order to provide more possibilities to children and adults to improve their language skills. Plurilingualism is widely encouraged and supported.

In the following, we turn our attention to the group of cross-border actors, who work regularly or as part of a temporary project with their colleagues from the neighbour country. They often have basic knowledge, but not enough skills to practise the neighbouring language during a conversation or a meeting. Of course, interpreting or bilingual moderation can help, but direct communication fosters a closer bond and makes it possible to clarify any outstanding issues spontaneously. Besides these direct outcomes, there are also more specific consequences. Lüdi explains e.g. that plurilingualism offers benefits to individuals, employers and society alike. A significant advantage is, of course, mutual understanding, but according to Lüdi, plurilingualism creates neural connections that have a positive impact on creativity and performance (Lüdi, 2017). So, thanks to plurilingual actors, we not only enjoy the direct benefits of seamless communication, but also a range of other positive effects.

So, how can the situation of cross-border actors with poor language skills be improved?

Several aspects have to be considered when choosing a learning method for this group of persons:

- These are persons who often have to combine working and family life; so, time and organisation is an important aspect
- Language learning must take into account the individual expectations of learners
- The learning method should be adaptable to a professional context, that means it should allow integrating topics and vocabulary which matters for their daily work
- Learning a language for professional benefits is a strong incentive. So, it helps if the employer recognises and values this initiative, and perhaps holds out the prospect of new job opportunities
- Language learning must take advantage of the proximity of neighbouring linguistic spaces (Faucompré, 2019). France and Germany are geographically close: take the example of Strasbourg and Kehl, where the Rhine separates the two countries. Several bridges link the two municipalities, the Strasbourg tram runs as far as Kehl, and residents enjoy a shared park, the *Jardin des deux rives*. Elsewhere, the proximity is even greater in some places, as one need only cross a street to find oneself in the neighbouring country. Using this multilingual ecosystem is a real advantage and an excellent opportunity to learn the neighbouring language or to improve one's language skills.
- Different cultures and cultural openness are essential in the context of language learning. Ideally, learning a language should go hand in hand with getting to know the neighbouring country and the colleagues there.

The connections between language and culture.

The link and the interaction of language and culture is essential and has to be taken into account in order to give learners the possibility to develop language skills that are not abstract, but living knowledge and that can be developed through experience.

Byram/Feng clarify, “that it is not the purpose of teaching [...] to change learners into members of another culture, but to make them part of the group who see themselves as mediators, able to compare, juxtapose and analyse” (Byram/Feng, 2004).

Jürgen Erfurt explains that communities and individuals, with their languages and cultures, do not exist in isolated spaces, but are interconnected with other communities and individuals across borders. Language plays an important role in these processes. (Erfurt, 2019). Of course, cultural differences are significant in the context of international cooperation. One solution is however not to focus on the differences, but on the commonalities, which is the essence of transculturality. And this is exactly what can work when learning a language. Learners need a purpose and this might be, as we explained above, a professional motivation, but also enthusiasm for a certain sport, for a hobby or, which is the best way, the commitment to a common cause.

The tandem method presents several specificities, and the link between language and culture is an important one. One inherent characteristic of the method is that language and culture are learnt simultaneously, as a matter of fact rather through experience than through lessons. Claire Kramsch inquires: “[...] *given that we want to teach language in such a way that learners are initiated into its social and cultural meanings, how many of these meanings must be made explicit, how many can be understood implicitly? How can a foreign way of viewing the world be taught via an educational culture which is itself the product of native conceptions and values?*” (Kramsch, 1993). This is in fact a key question concerning language learning in a professional context. For adults who want to improve their language skills in order to feel more confident in the working environment of cross-border cooperation, it is crucial not to limit their learning to the four classical skills of *listening, speaking, reading and writing*, but to go further and, as a first step, to be aware “*that language use is indissociable from the creation and transmission of culture*” (ibid.). This is an important step that has to be understood by learners and by teachers. According to the applied learning methods, learners can dive more or less deeply into the “other” culture, which allows them to react in a sensitive way on cultural obstacles or misunderstandings, but also to familiarise themselves with contents that are useful for their studies or their working fields.

According to Byram/Feng “*culture learning is perceived as less feasible if confined to the classroom than language learning. It needs to be experiential and experience of difference has to be at the centre of learners’ and teachers’ attention*” (Byram/Feng, 2004). And they go on to explain that “*tandem-learning, originally developed as a means of enhancing linguistic competence, is a means of creating opportunities for culture learning*” (ibid.).

We see that a method intended to fit to these challenges should provide the possibility to consider cultural aspects and allow actors to get in touch with colleagues from the neighbour country which is feasible, given the short distances in the border region. Furthermore, the method should be based on professional practice and be flexible in terms of time. The tandem method which will be presented in the next chapter seems to meet these requirements.

The tandem method as a tool to strengthen language skills

Tandem learning itself, the pure method, is nothing new. As a matter of fact, it had been developed in the 1960s in the context of binational language courses by the *French-German Youth Office*, even if nowadays characteristics concerning learner autonomy have become more and more important (Brammerts, 2010). Tandem learning is particularly well suited to today's demands for lifelong and collaborative learning.

What are its main characteristics, and how does it work? First, we would like to suggest a definition offered by Brammerts:

“In tandem language learning, two persons with different native languages communicate with each other in order to learn together and from one another. Both try

- *to improve their ability to communicate in their partner's native language*
- *to learn more about their partner and his or her cultural background, as well as*
- *to benefit from the partner's other knowledge and experience, for example in the areas of work, education or leisure” (ibid.)¹*

An important principle of tandem learning is the principle of reciprocity. Two persons regularly work together in a learning partnership. They support one another by each partner contributing the knowledge the other needs in order to achieve their individual learning goals. **Autonomy** is another important principle of the tandem method. It means that each partner is responsible for his or her own learning. The learners define their learning objectives themselves, and they decide in which way (online meeting, e-mail contact, etc.) they want to achieve them. Furthermore, they have to schedule the time slots for their meetings or other contacts with their partners, and they are asked to express which sort of support they would like to receive by the partners. This might be improvements of a written text, indications concerning pronunciation or help as far as the use of idioms is concerned etc. (see Brammerts, 2010). Regarding learner autonomy which has grown in importance over the years, David Little *“argues for an understanding of language learner autonomy in which the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are mutually supporting and fully integrated with each other”* (Little, 2007)

A very important general objective of the tandem method is the ability to communicate, in other words, to improve one's oral and written expression. Moreover, the method offers the possibility to know more about the partner's professional or other qualifications and

1 Original text in German

about the partner's cultural background. (Brammerts, 2010). In practice, the two partners may talk about the job of one of them, e.g. of a social worker in France, his or her tasks, daily challenges, the institutional framework, career possibilities, and so on. The exchange can be very practice-oriented if both of them have the same profession, but topics can also be found for persons with different jobs, e.g. remote working, work-life balance, mobility, etc., if the work-oriented focus is requested.

It is through this link between practising the language and discussing topics – in other words, putting new language skills into practice – that authentic communication takes place. It is important, that both partners benefit of the exchange. This is essential for a long-lasting partnership. In practice, that means that the common learning time has to be fairly shared (see Brammerts, 2010). For example, during 30 minutes partner A helps partner B to achieve his or her objectives; over the next 30 minutes, the opposite will take place. It is important to note that the learning partners do not teach. They help their partners as far as their own skills enable them. It is however important that tandem partners have a good knowledge of their own, native language and that they make a careful use of it which means that they speak distinctly, slowly, if needed, and that they use standard language.

Another noteworthy feature of the method is that it does not promise perfection. This might be a relief for language learners, especially those, who would like to use their new language skills immediately. As explained above, tandem means that one learner learns from another; it's a case of give and take. Yet the question may be asked if the outcome is satisfactory, or even if perfect language skills can be achieved. It is crucial to understand that the objective of the tandem method is not perfection, but the ability to communicate and to use the language in a given context, which might be the exchange of professional knowledge with the tandem partner.

Indeed, plurilingualism does not mean that one speaks one language well or perfectly and then adds another language. Individuals who speak several languages at different levels will make a different use of these languages. They will have an integrated language repertoire and "*the individual in question draws upon both his/her general and language skills and knowledge [...] in different ways*" (Council of Europe, 2001). (See also Lüdi 2017, Polzin-Haumann/Reissner, 2013).

So, in a nutshell, for a successful tandem partnership the principles of autonomy and reciprocity are essential. We see that the method is very flexible because, within a partnership, the two partners can choose different objectives. The partners are free to schedule their appointments, but it is important to keep them. However, there is one restriction: the method is not adapted to beginners. Learners should have an A2/B1 level in order to really benefit from the learning partnership. It is absolutely not necessary that the two partners have the same language level. Though, it is important for each partner to have a good command of his or her own language so that they can be a language model for their tandem partner.

Tandem courses provided by the Euro-Institut – an adapted methodology

At the Euro-Institut, tandem courses are offered in order to give the target groups the possibility to improve their language skills in a practice-oriented way. Besides the methodology itself, in terms of training, the cooperation on an institutional level is very important, too. The institutional context is in fact the third pillar of the method, besides the face-to-face sessions and the distance learning.

The institutional context

The Euro-Institut's target groups are mainly public service employees and other cross-border actors from France, Germany, Switzerland, and other European countries. That means that the Euro-Institut works closely with these institutions, some of which, as a matter of fact, are members or partners of the organisation. The organisation of tandem courses for a German and for a French municipality in the border region, which also maintain an active partnership, is an example of this institutional background. Public authorities, such as those in the fields of justice or occupational health and safety, which maintain cross-border contacts, have also supported this exchange through tandem courses, as have time-limited cross-border projects and the higher education sector. This way to organise tandem courses, in direct cooperation and on behalf of the institutions, has the advantage that these institutions can give the available places to the really concerned actors. For the Euro-Institut, as a contractor, this approach means that it can expect stable groups and participants who commit to taking part for the planned duration. The learners have, in general, the possibility to participate in the courses during their working time. The face-to-face parts of the courses are very often organised in-house, in a room provided by one of the participating institutions, and for these, the course is often more than a training: They actually welcome the learners as representatives of their partner institution. So, the learners feel very comfortable, because they are supported by their own and warmly welcomed by the partner institution. This is a good starting point for a successful language course.

The participants

In general, there are groups of 10 French and 10 German learners which allows creating 10 French-German tandems. As outlined above, the method is not adapted to absolute beginners. Since the participants are supposed to talk with their tandem partners from the very first day of the course, a certain knowledge, A2 or better B1, should exist. But we made the experience that participants who had quite poor language skills, but were open-minded, interested and committed, were able to progress quickly or refresh their knowledge on the basis of limited prior knowledge. The tandem method is based on communication, so, the ability and the will to communicate are crucial. Cohesion within the group is indeed important for learning progress (see also Rohrbach/Winiger, 2001).

When participants feel comfortable, they enjoy communicating and are motivated to learn more. In general, the learners really appreciate meeting up as a group. They feel connected, and sometimes, especially the permanent tandems become friends and stay in contact.

One of the first tasks at the beginning of a new course is the composition of the tandems. Who will work with whom during the course? The best situation to build up tandems is when both groups work in the same sector, e.g. social work, justice, culture, and so on. If learners from the same sector work together, one can be sure, that they have information to share. But still, it is good to take into account other aspects, too: is one of them a high hierarchical person and the other not, are there other characteristics that do not match, for example age or personality? These are aspects to have in mind, but it does not mean that tandems can't be formed when there are disparities.

In general, we have mixed groups and have to create tandems according to other characteristics than the professional ones. There are different possibilities:

- The participants create the tandems themselves: They describe themselves by choosing pictures and symbols, and the trainers form pairs based on the greatest similarities.
- We use the speed tandem method, which means that the German and French participants chat for just a few minutes to get to know the whole group quickly. By asking a few questions, they try to find out a bit about their potential learning partners so that they can form suitable tandems.
- The tandems are created by the trainers based on information provided, such as the professional activity, hobbies, or interests.

All these approaches have been tried and they work, even if there is no guarantee for sympathy or the same learning intensity. However, it is rare for a tandem partnership to fail completely, as the participants are generally motivated. As mentioned in chapter 3, different language levels within a tandem aren't a problem. It is important to speak well one's own language and to be a useful model for the partner. The only restriction to mention would be that two learners with very few language skills should not form a tandem. The communication would be too cumbersome, at least at first, and could lead to frustration.

Face-to-face learning

The tandem courses consist of a certain number of face-to-face sessions, often six, and so-called eTandem phases. During the face-to-face sessions the participants learn together, supported by the learning coaches, in various settings, the whole day long. During the eTandem phases, the tandems work together at a distance and autonomously.

A face-to-face session has the objectives to place the framework, to give information to learners, e.g., about available exercises and topics, and, particularly, to introduce the tandem method and to guide learners towards independent studying. Furthermore, learners have the possibility to test and to reactivate their language skills in a setting where they can

receive feedback and support from their learning coaches. In the beginning of the course, activities to get to know each other are important in order to create the very important cohesion within the group (see subchapter above). The learning coaches also help learners to set their learning goals. This is an important step, because the tandem method requires autonomy (see chapter 3), which in turn requires precise objectives. Each face-to-face session is dedicated to a certain topic. This can be the participants' professional activities, cross-border project management, intercultural communication, or other topics that are suitable for the group. The core of the course days consists of exercises in tandem. In the beginning, the tandems discuss quite easy topics, often of everyday life, in order to get accustomed to the method and to reactivate their language skills. The learning coaches ask them first to respect the time slots reserved for each language and not to switch to the other language if it starts to become difficult. Furthermore, the learners are asked to speak slowly and distinctly, particularly in their first (native) language. A second step is to ask the tandem partners to agree on the feedback they would like to have, for example, feedback on pronunciation, on vocabulary, etc., and when and in which form they would like to receive it (see Little, 2010). There is also time provided to take notes, e.g., new vocabulary or terms. As it turned out, most learners are satisfied to have some "homework". It seems that these tasks help them structuring the phase of autonomous learning. We made the experience that this preparation helps to ensure that the following days of the course are interesting and engaging. Examples are the preparation of a short sequence of a city tour in the target language, the presentation of one's job or a brief research on a specific topic. For some learners, oral presentations are a good way to prepare for similar situations at work.

The autonomous distance learning or eTandem

Between each face-to-face session, which takes in general place once a month, there are about four weeks of autonomous distance learning, the so-called eTandem phase. During this period, the tandems are expected to be in contact several times in order to learn together.

As with face-to-face tandems, the learners decide on the topic, the level and the way in which he or her wishes to learn and to be corrected. The native-speaking tandem partner adapts to these needs. This means that, in an eTandem session, the topic, language level and type of correction are likely to be completely different in one language compared to the other (Euro-Institut, 2014/2026). The tandem partners are advised to communicate by phone, by e-mail, or online. They can choose their topics according to their current needs in their jobs or, for example, in the context of a planned trip, or they can select ideas in worksheets provided to them by the learning coaches.

At the start of the course, the participants receive a work plan to help them organise their eTandem sessions with their partners. The challenge for the tandem is to really take the time to communicate regularly, which is crucial for their progress. If one of the two is not committed and not ready to organise regular meetings, this means a significant loss of learning opportunities for the partner.

The trainers or learning coaches

The tandem courses are coordinated and accompanied by two language trainers, a French native speaker and a German native speaker. Both speak the other trainer's language. Although trainers usually speak in their native language, it is still very helpful to be proficient in the other language as well. Particularly at the start of the course, learners sometimes need guidance in their own language, which means that verbal instructions need to be translated. Usually, one of the two language trainers introduces the activity in the language in which it is conducted. If not all learners understand this, the other language trainer can provide support in the other language. This applies in particular to guidance on methodology, learning strategies, or organisational matters.

Trainers do not teach, strictly speaking, but rather provide support. They coordinate the course as a whole, i.e. they determine the focus for each course day, they select the most appropriate method for forming the tandems, they are easy to reach and available for the participants when there are questions or difficulties. Their main task is to prepare and to structure the course sessions, select suitable exercises and, where necessary, adapt them for the group. During the course day, they moderate and organise the day and motivate the participants. On the one hand, structure is of course necessary in order to achieve the group's learning objectives, but experience shows that a certain flexibility is beneficial, too. Sometimes, there are learners who would like to share a presentation about a topic which is interesting for the group, sometimes participants are the source for new learning methods, e.g. the walking tandem, which combines a walk with a tandem exercise.

Measurable results of the tandem language courses

The objective of language courses, especially when they are organised or commissioned by institutions for their staff, is a sustainable impact. It is essential that participants are making progress and that they can make good use of their newly acquired competences. Therefore, after each course, an evaluation is realised in order to have a first outcome as far as the participants' perceptions are concerned. In 2025 we exploited the answers of 30 respondents from two courses, one six-month course and one three-month course. For example, we wanted to know: "What are your most important achievements concerning your language skills?" They answered as follows:

- Expansion of (technical) vocabulary (9)
- It is now easier for me to speak (even in complex situations) (7)
- Activate knowledge (4)
- Listening, comprehension (4)
- Formulating sentences.

Another open-ended question we asked explored the relationship between language and culture. The question was, "What are your most important achievements as far as culture is concerned?" The participants answered as follows:

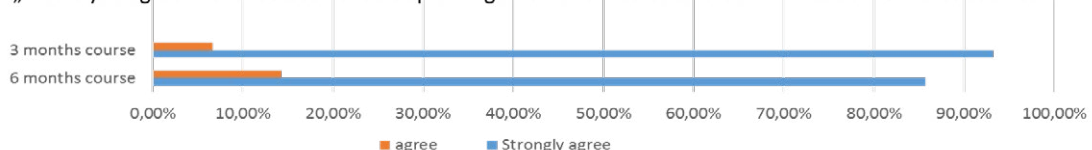
- System differences and discussions about them (6)
- Getting to know cultural differences and communication styles (4)
- Networking / thinking about a further language course and work shadowing (3)

These results are partly attributable to the professional context of the language course. The participants were interested in the institutional structures in neighbouring countries. They also mentioned cultural differences and different communication styles. It is positive that at least three participants are motivated to continue their language learning and/or to do a job shadowing in the neighbour country.

Concerning the connection between language and culture, we asked the groups: „Would you agree with the statement that plurilingualism and intercultural communication reinforce each other?“ The participants responded affirmatively with 100%, the very most of them "strongly agreed". None of them chose "neutral" or "disagree" or "strongly disagree".

Single choice question:

„Would you agree with the statement that plurilingualism and intercultural communication reinforce each other?“



Graphic: Euro-Institut, 2025

The participants recognised that language skills enable them to better perceive and deal with cultural differences. On the other hand, many found that the differences aroused their curiosity, and, with the help of language, they wanted to learn more about structures, functioning, and communication styles.

We also wanted to know more precisely which impact the course had on further exchanges in cross-border communication and asked the participants to react to the following statement: “I feel more confident about further exchanges with partners from neighbouring countries”. The participants could choose between “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neutral”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”. What is interesting to note is that nearly 70% of the learners of the six-month course agreed strongly, whereas this was only the case for nearly 50% of the three-month learners. This shows on the one hand that there has been a real outcome and on the other hand that the duration of the course has a measurable positive effect on the outcome.

Conclusion

In order to practice a dynamic and successful cross-border cooperation, language skills are a crucial factor. Of course, translation and interpretation can help, but direct communication strengthens personal relationships, limits misunderstandings, and is less expensive. However, the language barrier is still mentioned as being one of the most important cross-border obstacles. When choosing a learning method for the group of cross-border actors, on whom we focused here, several aspects have to be considered. There are practical and organisational aspects like the work-life balance and the professional context, but also the connections between language and culture.

The tandem method combines mutual learning and immediate application of the newly acquired knowledge. Reciprocity and autonomy are important principles of this language learning method, as well as the interest in the cultural background and the partner’s professional knowledge or other qualifications or experiences. Due to the learner autonomy, the method is particularly adapted to working people, and it allows, furthermore, to adjust the topics to the learners’ needs.

Moreover, the documented feedback of tandem course participants shows that many of the objectives set are being achieved, e.g., the expansion of technical vocabulary or a greater assurance in communication with partners from neighbouring countries. These results confirm the theory that the tandem method is an appropriate tool for language courses in the field of cross-border cooperation.

The Euro-Institut’s experience relates in particular to tandem language courses in the context of cross-border cooperation, which means here a regional context. However, with the necessary adjustments, such courses can also be delivered in other settings. For participants who do not come from the same region, an intensive course during several days would be another model. There is experience with a course of five consecutive days

or another with two phases of several days each. For regular courses over a certain time, online courses are a good alternative, even if in this context the personal contacts that are very important for the learning outcomes (see chapter 4) are significantly lower.

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Translanguaging Practices in Multilingual Foreign Language Classrooms in Cross-Border Regions

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Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical foundations and pedagogical applications of translanguaging in multilingual and cross-border educational contexts. It reviews the emergence of translanguaging within the multilingual turn in sociolinguistics, highlighting its challenge to monolingual ideologies and its potential to support inclusive and equitable educational practices. The empirical component presents a case study conducted at Uzhhorod National University in Zakarpattia, a multilingual cross-border region of Ukraine. The study investigated the effectiveness of pedagogically structured translanguaging strategies in university foreign language classrooms. Thirty-four second-year students participated in an eight-week intervention, divided into an experimental group exposed to translanguaging-oriented instruction and a control group receiving traditional target-language-only instruction. Data were collected through teacher and student questionnaires, classroom observations, vocabulary and grammar tests, oral fluency assessments, and a final comprehensive language test. The findings demonstrate that translanguaging practices positively influenced students' comprehension of complex linguistic material, vocabulary retention, communicative confidence, classroom participation, and intercultural awareness. Students in the experimental group displayed more favourable attitudes toward multilingual instruction and achieved higher levels of communicative, lexical, and grammatical competence than those in the control group. Teachers also reported that translanguaging facilitated the explanation of difficult concepts, reduced learner anxiety, and promoted active classroom interaction. The study confirms that pedagogically structured translanguaging can serve as an effective educational resource in multilingual university classrooms, particularly in border and cross-border regions characterised by linguistic diversity. The findings contribute to growing evidence supporting translanguaging as a transformative pedagogical approach that values learners' complete linguistic repertoires and enhances both language learning and educational inclusion.

Keywords: Translanguaging, Pedagogical Translanguaging, Multilingualism, Cross-Border Education, Foreign Language Teaching, Multilingual Classrooms

Introduction

The accelerating processes of globalisation, migration, transnational mobility, and intercultural communication have transformed the linguistic landscape of contemporary societies. Educational institutions increasingly serve learners who navigate multiple languages, cultures, and identities in their everyday lives. As a result, multilingualism has become a defining characteristic of many educational contexts, particularly in border and cross-border regions where linguistic diversity forms an integral part of social interaction and cultural exchange. These developments have challenged traditional monolingual approaches to language education and prompted scholars and educators to seek more inclusive pedagogical frameworks capable of responding to multilingual realities.

Recent developments in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics have questioned long-standing assumptions that languages exist as separate, bounded, and autonomous systems. Instead, language is increasingly understood as a dynamic, socially situated practice through which individuals draw on a range of linguistic and semiotic resources to communicate and construct meaning. Within this broader theoretical shift, the concept of translanguaging has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for understanding multilingual communication. Translanguaging refers to the flexible deployment of an individual's complete linguistic repertoire in order to make meaning, communicate effectively, and participate in social life. By challenging rigid language boundaries, translanguaging recognises multilingual speakers not as users of separate languages but as individuals who draw upon integrated linguistic resources.

The growing interest in translanguaging has generated extensive research into its theoretical foundations and pedagogical applications. Studies have demonstrated that translanguaging can enhance learners' comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, language awareness, communicative confidence, and academic achievement. Furthermore, translanguaging has been recognised as a means of promoting educational equity by validating students' linguistic resources and challenging deficit-oriented perceptions of multilingual learners. Consequently, pedagogical translanguaging has become an increasingly important area of research within language education, bilingual education, and multilingual education.

Border regions frequently function as multilingual contact zones where languages, identities, and cultural practices intersect. Such environments provide particularly valuable contexts for examining translanguaging practices, as multilingual communication forms a natural part of everyday social life. Despite growing scholarly interest in both translanguaging and border studies, relatively limited attention has been devoted to investigating pedagogical translanguaging in higher education settings located within multilingual cross-border regions.

This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the theoretical foundations of translanguaging in border and cross-border educational contexts and by presenting a case study conducted at Uzhhorod National University in Zakarpattia, a multilingual region of western Ukraine characterised by the coexistence of Ukrainian, Hungarian, Romanian,

Slovak, German, and other linguistic communities. The study explores the implementation of pedagogically structured translanguaging practices in university foreign language classrooms and investigates their impact on students' linguistic and communicative development.

The objectives of the study are twofold. First, it aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the theoretical developments that have shaped contemporary understandings of borders, multilingualism, and translanguaging. Second, it seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of translanguaging strategies in multilingual foreign language instruction through an empirical classroom-based investigation. Particular attention is paid to the influence of translanguaging on students' comprehension, vocabulary retention, communicative confidence, classroom participation, and intercultural awareness.

By integrating theoretical discussion with empirical evidence, the paper contributes to ongoing debates concerning multilingual pedagogies and language education in linguistically diverse environments. It argues that translanguaging represents a valuable pedagogical resource capable of supporting more inclusive, equitable, and effective educational practices, especially in multilingual and cross-border settings where linguistic diversity constitutes an everyday reality.

Translanguaging in Border and Cross-Border Educational Contexts: Theoretical Foundations

Since the emergence of Border Studies as an interdisciplinary field, scholarly understandings of borders have undergone a significant transformation. Earlier approaches conceptualised borders primarily as fixed territorial lines separating nation-states. Contemporary perspectives, however, increasingly emphasise the dynamic, relational, and connective dimensions of borders. Rather than viewing borders merely as sites of division, recent scholarship highlights their role as spaces of encounter, interaction, and negotiation, where social, cultural, and linguistic practices intersect.

This shift reflects broader theoretical developments within the humanities and social sciences. As Wille (2021) observes, border research has progressively shifted from static notions of the border toward an examination of bordering as an ongoing process involving complex, interconnected practices. Border regions are therefore understood not simply as geographical margins but as socially produced contact zones characterised by mobility, hybridity, and multilingual interaction.

Contemporary border studies emphasise an interdisciplinary perspective, examining borders as complex, dynamic constructions and exploring the social, cultural, political, and linguistic processes that transcend, reshape, or are constrained by them (Wille et al. 2021, p. 8). Theoretical dimensions of border studies conceptualise borders not simply as fixed geopolitical boundaries but as dynamic social, cultural, and political processes. Central analytical dimensions include bordering practices, such as the construction and

negotiation of socio-cultural identities, the sociopolitical dimensions of multilingualism in border regions, and the role of language and discourse in shaping cross-border interactions and identities.

A comparable transformation has occurred in language studies. According to Baynham and Lee (2019, p. 15), contemporary linguistic scholarship increasingly treats language as “dynamic and emergent rather than as a reified code.” This process-oriented perspective resonates with Street’s (1993) influential proposition that “culture is verb,” emphasising action, practice, and continual meaning-making rather than fixed structures.

Consequently, traditional conceptions of language as a bounded and autonomous system have been challenged. Moore, Bradley, and Simpson (2020, p. 2) note that the conventional understanding of languages as monolithic entities existing independently of communicative practice has largely been abandoned in favour of conceptualisations of “*linguaging*”. Within this framework, language is viewed as social action that mobilises a broad repertoire of linguistic and semiotic resources in situated communicative contexts.

The convergence of these theoretical developments creates fertile ground for examining language practices in border regions. Linguistic Border Studies increasingly investigates how language and borders interact at multiple scales, encompassing both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Such research may address language policies, everyday multilingual practices, the construction and contestation of linguistic boundaries, discursive processes of border production and deconstruction, critiques of linguistic nativeness, sociolinguistic dynamics in borderlands, and diverse linguistic, political, and aesthetic semiotic practices.

Within this context, multilingual language use becomes particularly significant. The notion of “border linguaging” seeks to connect the spatial complexity of border regions with multilingual communicative practices, emphasising how speakers negotiate linguistic resources in socially and politically contested spaces.

The Multilingual Turn and the Emergence of Translanguaging

The growing recognition of multilingualism as a global reality has fundamentally altered approaches to language and communication. While monolingual ideologies historically dominated language education, contemporary societies are increasingly characterised by linguistic diversity and mobility. As Kleyn and García (2019) note, language teaching traditionally prioritised monolingual approaches designed to develop proficiency in English while often disregarding learners’ linguistic backgrounds.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, multilingualism increasingly replaced mono- and bilingualism as the dominant paradigm in sociolinguistic research. Makoni and Pennycook (2007) argue that this development reshaped the linguistic ecology of contemporary societies and challenged conventional assumptions about language boundaries. Within this context, García and Wei (2014) introduced the concept of “translanguaging” to capture the fluid communicative practices of multilingual speakers.

The emergence of translanguaging coincided with what has been termed the “multilingual turn” in sociolinguistics. This intellectual movement sought to move beyond viewing languages as naturally bounded, fixed, and autonomous entities. Although several related concepts emerged during this period, including codemeshing, polylingual languaging, metrolingualism, and transglossia, translanguaging has developed into the most influential framework (Straszer, Paulsrud & Rosén, 2022).

The concept itself has evolved considerably. Initially, translanguaging referred to a pedagogical strategy involving the planned use of two named languages in classroom input and output (Lewis, Jones & Baker, 2012). Over time, however, the term expanded to encompass the broader communicative practices of multilingual speakers. García and Wei (2014) define translanguaging as the fluid deployment of an individual’s complete linguistic repertoire to create meaning, communicate, and engage with the world.

Baker (2011, p. 288) conceptualises translanguaging as “the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages.” This definition highlights the cognitive, communicative, and experiential dimensions of multilingual language use. Translanguaging is therefore concerned not merely with linguistic form but with communicative function, cognitive activity, and the construction of meaning. Similarly, García (2009, p. 45) defines translanguaging as the “multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds.” This perspective challenges structuralist models that treat languages as separate systems and instead promotes an integrational understanding of language as interconnected, dynamic, and socially situated (Bouknify, 2025, p. 72).

According to Bouknify (2025, p. 72), translanguaging allows bilingual individuals to draw upon their combined linguistic resources to construct meaning and express identities, thereby challenging traditional assumptions that languages operate as separate systems governed by fixed norms. The concept recognises bilingualism and multilingualism as normal human conditions and emphasises the flexibility of linguistic practices in everyday communication.

Despite growing linguistic diversity, many educational systems remain influenced by monolingual assumptions. The dominance of monolingualism in language education has historically resulted in policies that discourage or prohibit the use of students’ home languages in educational settings (Bouknify, 2025, p. 71). Gogolin (1997; 2021) characterises this phenomenon as the “monolingual habitus”, defined as the deeply embedded assumption that monolingualism constitutes the norm within a nation-state. Although often implicit, such assumptions can disadvantage multilingual learners. Gogolin (2011) argues that multilingual students are frequently evaluated through a deficit lens, being perceived as lacking linguistic competence rather than possessing valuable multilingual resources.

Research demonstrates that multilingual learners are disproportionately vulnerable to educational inequalities. Menken (2013) and Moraru et al. (2025) note that such students may be placed in lower educational tracks, retained in grades, or referred to special education programs based on deficit-oriented assessments of their language abilities.

Translanguaging offers an alternative perspective by viewing learners' linguistic repertoires as assets rather than obstacles. Numerous studies have demonstrated the educational value of incorporating students' heritage and home languages into classroom practice. Research by Canagarajah (2012), Cummins (2008), and García and Wei (2014), shows that multilingual approaches improve teaching effectiveness, enhance academic achievement, and strengthen language awareness. By connecting languages, learners can develop deeper conceptual understanding and improved retention of knowledge. Translanguaging also highlights the importance of home languages as valuable resources in children's educational trajectories (Moraru et al. 2025, p. 2). From this perspective, multilingualism becomes a pedagogical resource that facilitates learning, identity development, and participation, especially in border contexts.

The scholars usually distinguish between translanguaging as the flexible use of multilinguals' complete linguistic repertoire for communication, and teacher-directed translanguaging, i.e., structured pedagogical practices that promote the use of learners' full communicative resources in the classroom (Luić, 2017, p. 219).

Pedagogical Translanguaging

Among the various applications of translanguaging, pedagogical translanguaging has received particular attention within educational research. Although translanguaging practices occur naturally in multilingual communities, pedagogical translanguaging refers specifically to the intentional use of learners' linguistic resources to support teaching and learning. Cenoz (2017, p. 194) defines pedagogical translanguaging as translanguaging practices that are deliberately planned and implemented by teachers within classroom contexts. Through pedagogical translanguaging, teachers mobilise students' complete linguistic repertoires and facilitate meaningful interaction across languages (Cummins, 2019). Pedagogical translanguaging is known to be widely credited for enhancing students' development of both content and language (Nguyen et al. 2025).

According to Cenoz and Gorter (2020), pedagogical translanguaging encourages the use of multilingual repertoires and multimodal resources to foster both linguistic and academic development. Although now implemented in diverse educational settings, pedagogical translanguaging was initially developed for language classrooms because of its potential to support target-language learning while simultaneously drawing on students' existing linguistic knowledge.

The pedagogy of translanguaging has subsequently been adopted in a wide range of educational contexts, including mainstream education, higher education, foreign language instruction, immersion programs, heritage language education, minority-language education, and content and language integrated learning (Bonacina-Pugh, Costa

Cabral & Huang, 2021). Nevertheless, these pedagogical practices operate within diverse sociopolitical contexts shaped by global inequalities and differing patterns of linguistic diversity (Bonacina-Pugh, Costa Cabral & Huang, 2021; Heugh, 2021).

The overarching goal of pedagogical translanguaging is to create flexible plurilingual spaces where learners can utilise their complete linguistic repertoires as resources for communication and meaning-making (García, 2009). Such spaces challenge hierarchical language ideologies and seek to recognise all languages as valuable educational resources.

Importantly, translanguaging has transformative potential, particularly for minoritised linguistic groups and learners in cross-border regions. Research suggests that translanguaging can contribute to reducing educational inequalities by validating linguistic diversity and expanding opportunities for participation (García, 2009; Heugh, 2021).

Moreover, translanguaging can be presented as a framework for understanding how multilingual practices shape and reflect personal and collective identities while engaging with broader ideological and language policy issues (Tsokalidou, 2016, p. 110).

Recent scholarship has sought to identify the specific processes through which translanguaging occurs. Moraru et al. (2025) distinguish between constitutive and leveraging processes.

Constitutive processes include:

- Combining linguistic features associated with different named languages;
- Employing semiotic features multimodally;
- Translating;
- Comparing languages.

Leveraging processes include:

- Collaborating;
- Brokering;
- Designing multilingual linguistic landscapes.

Accordingly, translanguaging fundamentally depends on the first constitutive process, the combination of linguistic features traditionally attributed to different languages. The remaining constitutive and leveraging processes may occur simultaneously or sequentially to enhance multilingual meaning-making. However, practices that do not involve the integration of linguistic features from different languages are not considered translanguaging.

Research also identifies several forms of pedagogical translanguaging. Gusdian et al. (2026) found that one common practice involves enhancing metalinguistic awareness, whereby teachers encourage students to reflect on linguistic similarities and differences to deepen understanding of the target language. A second practice involves utilising learners' whole linguistic repertoires across various classroom activities (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). Finally, translanguaging shifts refer to teachers' spontaneous decisions to alternate between languages in response to learners' immediate communicative and educational

needs (Gusdian et al. 2026). Translation and code-switching remain among the most frequently observed classroom manifestations of translanguaging, when code-switching involves movement between languages and may also include shifts in tone, register, and communicative style depending on context and purpose.

Educational Benefits of Translanguaging

A substantial body of research highlights the educational benefits associated with translanguaging practices. Wedin (2022) argues that learners engage more deeply with educational content when they can connect new information to their prior linguistic and cultural knowledge. Such practices enable teachers to gain a better understanding of students as individuals and to adapt instruction to their specific needs and interests. By recognising students' cultural and linguistic experiences, translanguaging creates more inclusive classroom environments where learners are encouraged to participate actively in the learning process. This inclusive atmosphere can enhance motivation, engagement, and academic achievement.

Research also demonstrates that translanguaging strengthens conceptual understanding, supports bilingual proficiency, improves language awareness, and facilitates knowledge retention (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cummins, 2019; García & Wei, 2014). Through flexible movement across languages, learners are able to build richer connections between concepts and linguistic forms.

Furthermore, translanguaging precedes and supports interaction among multilingual speakers, particularly among emergent bilingual learners who assist one another in meaning-making processes. Alam (2020, p. 361) argues that translanguaging possesses considerable potential for transforming multilingual subjectivities and promoting equitable participation in society. Nevertheless, despite its benefits, translanguaging continues to be viewed with suspicion in some educational contexts where monolingual ideologies remain influential.

Although pedagogical translanguaging has become a major focus of educational research, important challenges remain. Gusdian et al. (2026) note that relatively little attention has been devoted to investigating teachers' actual translanguaging practices despite teachers' central role in implementing translanguaging pedagogies. Moreover, studies have shown that translanguaging practices are often selectively applied. Li (2022) observes that some educational contexts validate only dominant or standardised languages while marginalising non-standard varieties and less prestigious minority languages. Such selective practices may undermine the transformative potential of translanguaging by reproducing existing linguistic hierarchies.

Consequently, scholars continue to emphasise the need for greater integration of translanguaging into teacher education and classroom practice. Developing teachers' understanding of multilingual pedagogies is particularly important in linguistically diverse and cross-border regions where multilingual communication forms an integral part of everyday life.

The theoretical developments discussed above demonstrate a profound shift in understandings of multilingual practices in border regions. Contemporary Border Studies conceptualise borders as dynamic sites of interaction rather than fixed divisions, while contemporary sociolinguistics increasingly views language as fluid, emergent, and socially situated. Within this intellectual context, translanguaging has emerged as a powerful framework for understanding multilingual communication. Translanguaging challenges traditional views of languages as separate systems and instead conceptualises multilingual speakers as drawing upon integrated linguistic repertoires to construct meaning, negotiate identities, and participate in social life. As both a theoretical perspective and a pedagogical approach, translanguaging promotes inclusion, values linguistic diversity, and supports learners' academic and linguistic development.

Particularly in multilingual and cross-border regions, translanguaging offers a valuable lens for understanding how individuals navigate complex linguistic landscapes. By recognising all linguistic resources as assets, translanguaging contributes to more equitable, inclusive, and effective educational practices while challenging the monolingual assumptions that continue to shape many educational systems.

Traditional foreign language pedagogy has long been based on the monolingual principle, which holds that only the target language is used in classroom instruction. In many educational contexts, both teachers and students have traditionally been monolingual and shared the same linguistic and cultural background. However, the growing processes of globalisation, migration, multiculturalism, and multilingualism have significantly transformed contemporary educational environments. As a result, teaching foreign languages to multilingual learners has become increasingly relevant, especially in multilingual and multicultural regions.

Implementing Translanguaging in Multilingual Foreign Language Classrooms:

A Case Study

Uzhhorod National University is situated in Zakarpattia, a multilingual cross-border region of Ukraine characterised by the coexistence of Ukrainian, Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, and German. Such a sociolinguistic environment creates favourable conditions for conducting research on pedagogical translanguaging. The experiment was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Philology, where multilingual students, alongside students of Ukrainian nationality, study English, German, French, and Romanian.

The *aim* of the case study is to investigate the effectiveness of translanguaging strategies in university English language classrooms and determine their impact on students' linguistic and communicative competence. The study investigates whether controlled pedagogical translanguaging improves comprehension, participation, vocabulary acquisition, learner confidence, and intercultural awareness.

The *objectives* of the case study are as follows:

- to identify translinguaging practices used by bilingual/multilingual teachers;
- to compare traditional monolingual instruction with translinguaging-oriented instruction;
- to analyse students' attitudes toward multilingual classroom practices;
- to examine how translinguaging affects vocabulary retention, speaking fluency, grammar comprehension, classroom interaction, and anxiety reduction.

The objectives of the study gave rise to the following research questions:

- *How does translinguaging affect students' participation in foreign language classes (L2 and L3)?*
- *Does translinguaging enhance comprehension of complex linguistic material?*
- *Which translinguaging strategies prove most effective in multilingual classroom settings?*
- *How do students perceive the use of multiple languages during classroom instruction?*
- *Are there differences in the effectiveness of translinguaging practices between English (L2) and German or Romanian (L3) classes?*

The study hypothesises that *pedagogically structured translinguaging practices in multilingual university classrooms of cross-border regions contribute to higher levels of learner engagement, comprehension, vocabulary retention, and communicative confidence than monolingual instructional approaches.*

Quantitative data were collected through language achievement tests and structured questionnaires administered before and after the intervention, whereas qualitative data were obtained from classroom observations, reflective teacher journals, and semi-structured interviews. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence enabled methodological triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

The case study involved 34 second-year students developing practical communicative skills in English as an L2 and German or Romanian as an L3. The participants were deliberately divided into two groups: an experimental group of 17 multilingual (bilingual) students and a control group of 17 monolingual Ukrainian students. Prior to the intervention, all participants completed a diagnostic assessment consisting of a vocabulary test, a grammar test, an oral communicative task, and a questionnaire on previous language-learning experience. The diagnostic assessment indicated comparable levels of English proficiency, grammar knowledge, vocabulary, and communicative performance in the two groups at the beginning of the study. The observed differences were minimal and did not affect the implementation of the intervention. The experimental and control groups were therefore considered comparable with respect to their initial language competence. Assignment to groups followed existing class organisation; consequently, the study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control-group design rather than random assignment.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the faculty research committee. Participation was voluntary. All participants provided informed consent and were assured that questionnaire responses would remain anonymous and would not influence their course grades. Three bilingual instructors (Ukrainian–German, Ukrainian–Romanian, and Ukrainian–Hungarian) participated in the study by teaching English as the first foreign language and German or Romanian (elementary level) as the second foreign language. In the experimental group, the instructors implemented pedagogically structured translanguaging practices, whereas in the control group, they employed traditional target-language-only instruction.

To ensure consistency of implementation, all participating instructors received common methodological guidelines describing the translanguaging activities, expected learning outcomes, lesson sequence, and principles governing the use of multiple languages. Throughout the intervention, teachers followed the same instructional framework while adapting examples to English–German or English–Romanian classes. The experiment was conducted over a period of eight weeks and comprised three stages: diagnostic, intervention, and evaluation, each designed to fulfil a specific research objective. During the diagnostic stage, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of translanguaging practices in multilingual foreign language classrooms.

A mixed-methods approach was selected because quantitative data alone could not fully explain how translanguaging influenced classroom interaction and learner confidence. Combining statistical evidence with qualitative observations enabled a more comprehensive evaluation of both learning outcomes and classroom processes.

Qualitative data collection methods included classroom observations, reflective teacher journals, and informal interviews with both teachers and students concerning their bilingual and multilingual experiences. Furthermore, foreign language instructors completed open-ended questionnaires to explore their translanguaging practices and perceptions of the challenges of teaching foreign languages in multilingual educational contexts.

Quantitative data were collected through an initial student questionnaire that measured attitudes toward multilingual classroom learning and the use of translanguaging strategies in foreign language instruction. Additional quantitative instruments employed during the diagnostic phase included a vocabulary retention test, a grammar comprehension test, and an oral fluency assessment rubric.

The questionnaire items were developed based on previous research on translanguaging and multilingual pedagogy (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; García & Wei, 2014) and adapted to the multilingual university context of Zakarpattia. Prior to the study, the questionnaire was reviewed by three specialists in applied linguistics and language pedagogy to establish content validity. Minor revisions were made to improve clarity and wording.

A pilot administration involving students who did not participate in the experiment was conducted to verify the comprehensibility of the questionnaire items and testing procedures.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires and the language achievement tests were analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies, percentages, and average scores were calculated to compare the results of the experimental and control groups before and after the intervention. The findings were presented in tables and figures to illustrate changes in students’ attitudes toward translanguaging, classroom participation, communicative confidence, vocabulary retention, grammar comprehension, and overall language performance. The quantitative results were interpreted by comparing the trends observed in the two groups throughout the study.

The qualitative data collected through classroom observations, teachers’ reflective journals, and informal interviews with teachers and students were analysed using thematic analysis. The data were carefully reviewed to identify recurring themes related to the implementation of translanguaging practices, students’ classroom participation, communicative confidence, and perceived learning benefits. The qualitative findings were then compared with the quantitative results to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the translanguaging intervention’s effectiveness.

The preliminary open-ended questionnaire was administered to three bilingual foreign language teachers, with the expectation that it would yield valuable insights into their attitudes, experiences, and perceived challenges in implementing translanguaging practices in multilingual foreign language classrooms.

Table 1. Open-ended questionnaire administered to the multilingual teachers

	Questions	Answers
1.	<i>How would you describe your own multilingual and multicultural background, and how has it influenced your teaching practices?</i>	
2.	<i>What role do you think students’ native and additional languages should play in university-level foreign language instruction?</i>	
3.	Can you describe situations in which you intentionally use more than one language during English or German/Romanian classes?	
4.	What translanguaging strategies or multilingual teaching techniques do you consider most effective in helping students understand difficult linguistic material?	
5.	What challenges have you encountered when teaching multilingual students in foreign language classrooms?	
6.	In your opinion, how does translanguaging influence students’ participation, motivation, confidence, and communicative interaction during classroom activities?	
7.	How do you perceive the differences between monolingual and multilingual students in terms of foreign language learning strategies and classroom behaviour?	

Source: own elaboration

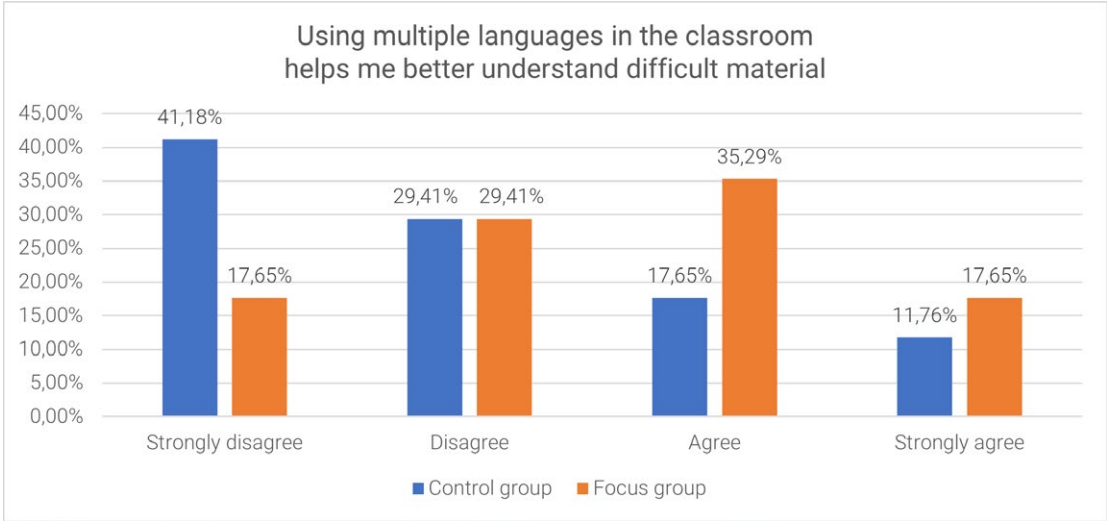
As concluded in previous studies, the successful implementation of translanguageing depends largely on teachers' attitudes, as these shape whether multilingual practices are encouraged or restricted in the classroom (Lujić, 2017, p.223). The responses obtained from the preliminary teacher questionnaire demonstrate a generally positive attitude toward translanguageing practices in multilingual foreign language classrooms. All three teachers emphasised that translanguageing increases students' willingness to participate in classroom interaction. The instructors observed that multilingual support reduces students' fear of making mistakes and encourages weaker learners to engage in discussions and collaborative activities. The teachers consistently reported that translanguageing is particularly useful when explaining complex grammar structures, abstract vocabulary, and culturally specific concepts. Cross-linguistic comparison and multilingual scaffolding were identified as effective pedagogical tools facilitating comprehension. The teachers particularly emphasised the role of comparative analysis in helping students identify similarities and differences among languages, thereby fostering deeper linguistic awareness. According to the teachers' observations, students generally perceive multilingual instruction positively. The instructors noted reduced anxiety, increased motivation, and greater emotional comfort among students participating in translanguageing-oriented activities. These results confirm that translanguageing is a normal and effective communicative practice in bilingual and multilingual communities, supporting García and Wei's (2014) theoretical framework.

Although the teachers evaluated translanguageing positively, they also identified several methodological challenges: maintaining sufficient target-language exposure; preventing excessive reliance on the native language; addressing differences in students' proficiency levels; and balancing multilingual support with communicative immersion. These responses demonstrate that translanguageing requires careful pedagogical structuring rather than unrestricted language mixing. The preliminary teacher questionnaire confirms that bilingual instructors perceive translanguageing as an effective pedagogical approach in multilingual university classrooms.

The next step in the case study was administering a closed-ended questionnaire to the students in the experimental and control groups.

The data provided in Figure 1 demonstrate significant differences between the control and focus groups regarding students' perceptions of multilingual instruction. The control group showed predominantly negative attitudes toward translanguageing, with 70.59% of students disagreeing that using multiple languages helps them understand difficult material. In contrast, the focus group demonstrated more positive perceptions: 52.94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. These findings support the idea that multilingual instructional strategies positively influence students' learning experience and understanding.

Figure 1. Initial survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))

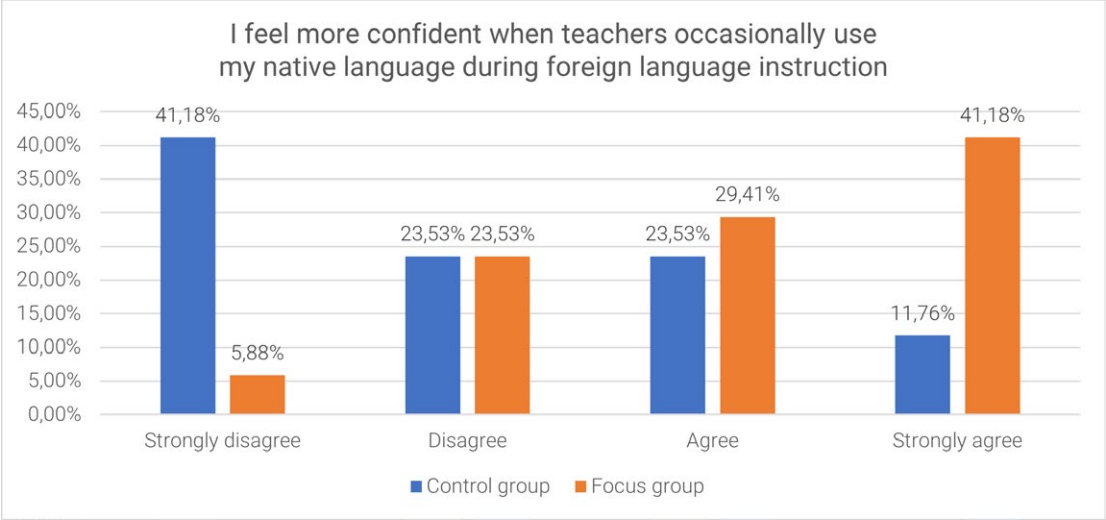


Source: own elaboration

The results of the respondents' answers demonstrate a clear difference between the control and focus groups in students' confidence levels during foreign language instruction. The majority of students in the control group (64.71%) expressed negative attitudes toward using their native language in foreign language instruction. In contrast, 70.59% of students in the focus group agreed or strongly agreed that occasional use of the native language increases their confidence (See Figure 2).

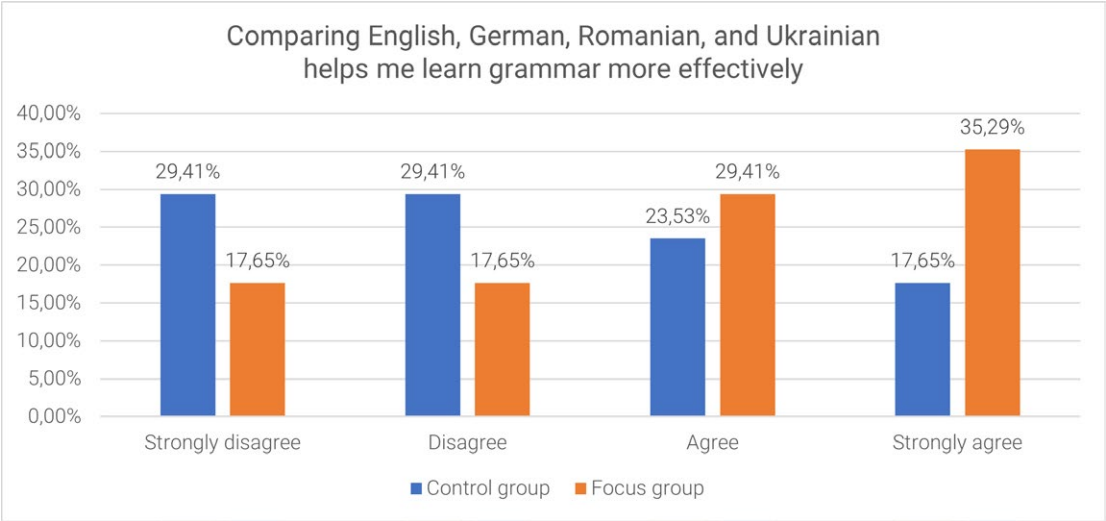
The data provided in Figure 3 indicate that students in the focus group demonstrated a more positive attitude toward cross-linguistic comparison in grammar learning than those in the control group. While opinions in the control group were relatively divided, the majority of students in the focus group (64.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that comparing English, German, Romanian, and Ukrainian facilitates grammar learning.

Figure 2. Initial survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



Source: own elaboration

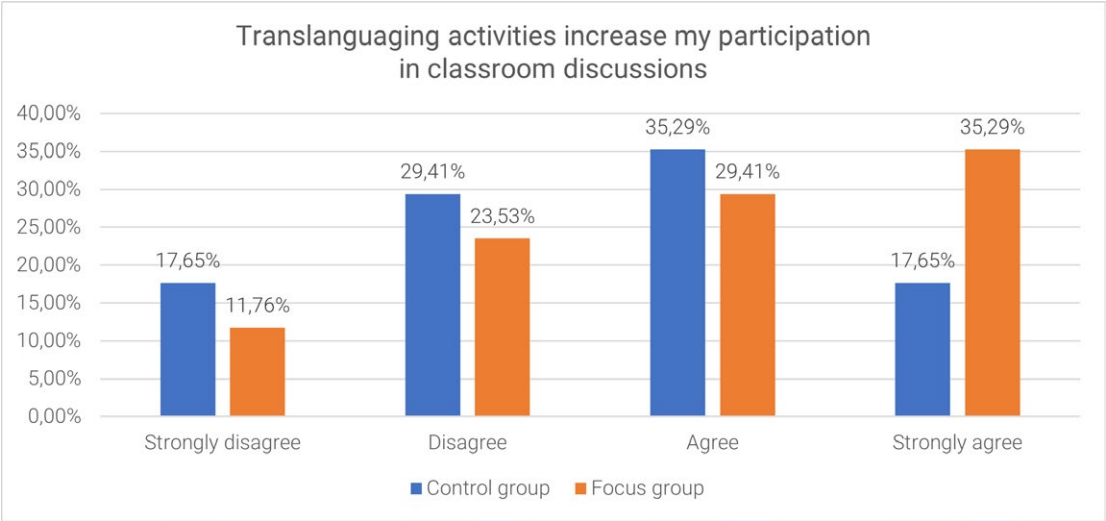
Figure 3. Initial survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



Source: own elaboration

The results of students' responses to one of the survey questions (See Figure 4) show that students in the focus group perceived translinguaging activities as more beneficial for classroom participation than did students in the control group. In the focus group, 64.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that translinguaging activities increased their participation in classroom discussions, compared to 52.94% in the control group.

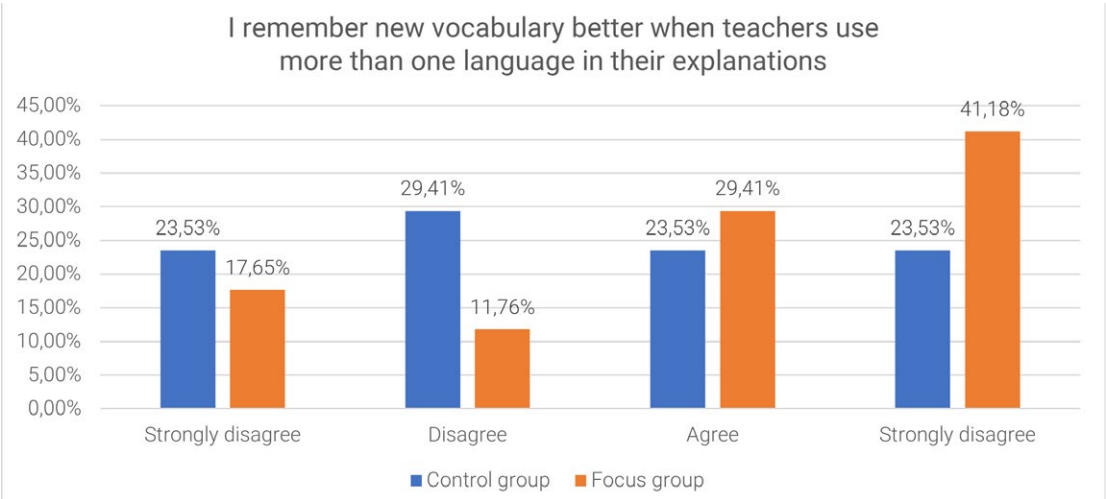
Figure 4. Initial survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



Source: own elaboration

The data in Figure 5 show that students in the focus group evaluated multilingual vocabulary explanations more positively than those in the control group. While the control group showed mixed opinions, the majority of students in the focus group (73%) agreed or strongly agreed that using multiple languages helps them remember new vocabulary more effectively. These findings suggest that translanguaging strategies positively influence vocabulary retention and support the research hypothesis that multilingual instruction is effective in foreign language learning.

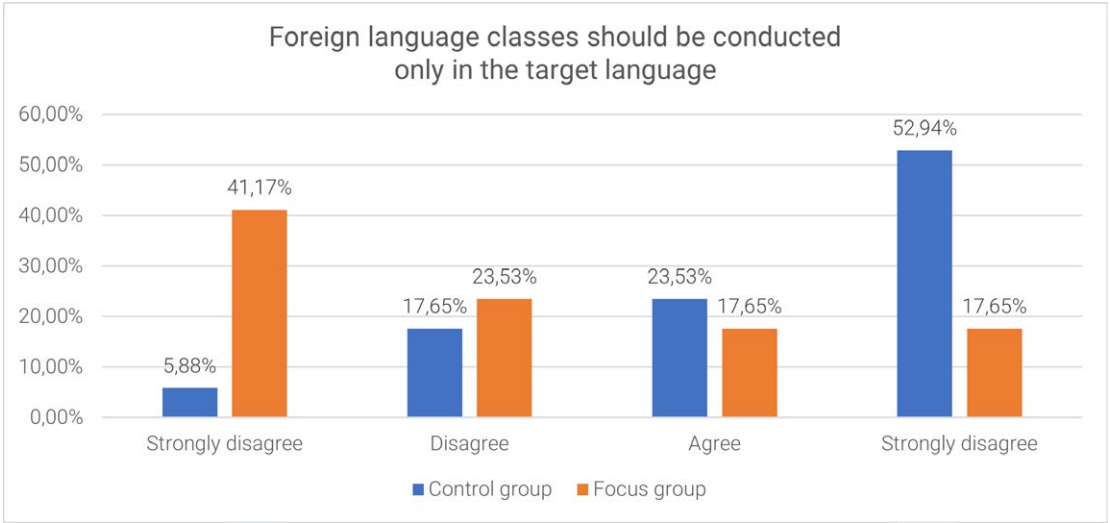
Figure 5. Initial survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



Source: own elaboration

The data of Figure 6 reveal substantial differences between the control and focus groups regarding attitudes toward target-language-only instruction. The majority of students in the control group (76.47%) supported target-language-only instruction, whereas 64.7% of students in the focus group disagreed with this approach. These findings suggest that students exposed to translanguaging practices become more supportive of multilingual instruction and less oriented toward monolingual teaching models.

Figure 6. Initial survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



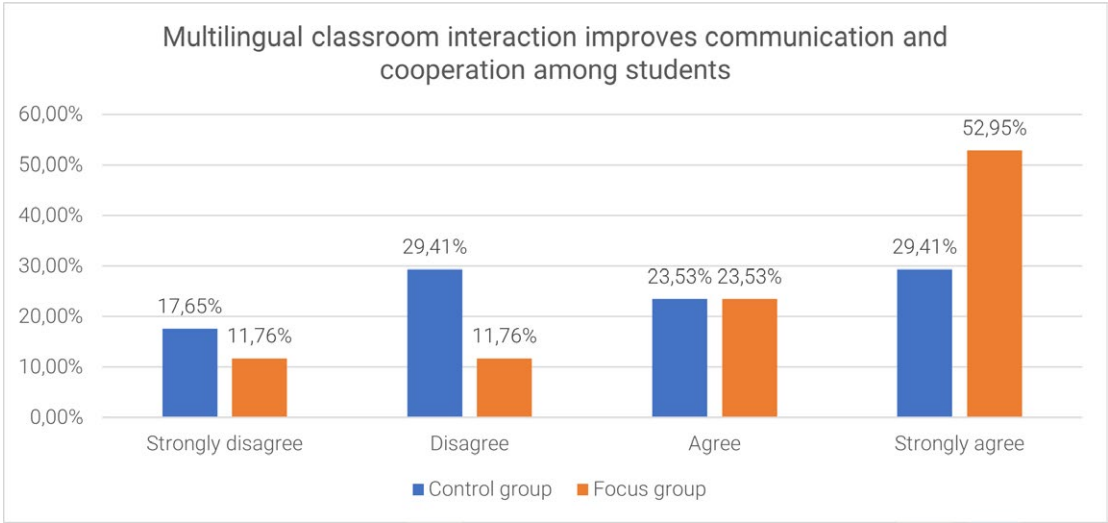
Source: own elaboration

The survey results in Figure 7 display that students in the focus group perceived classroom interaction in a multilingual classroom more positively than those in the control group. In the focus group, 76.48% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that multilingual interaction improves communication and cooperation among students, compared to 52.94% in the control group. These findings indicate that translanguaging practices foster collaborative learning, communicative interaction, and a more supportive classroom environment.

The results of the initial questionnaire administered to students within the case study framework indicate noticeable differences between the control and focus groups in their attitudes toward translanguaging in foreign language instruction. Students in the focus group generally demonstrated more positive perceptions of multilingual classroom practices, particularly regarding comprehension of difficult linguistic material, vocabulary retention, communicative confidence, and participation in classroom discussions. The findings also show that multilingual instructional practices help reduce students' anxiety when speaking a foreign language and promote more effective communication and cooperation among learners. In contrast, students in the control group expressed stronger support for traditional target-language-only instruction and showed less confidence in

the pedagogical value of multilingual practices. The questionnaire results suggest that pedagogically structured translanguaging is positively perceived by multilingual learners and may contribute to greater learner engagement, emotional comfort, and effectiveness of foreign language acquisition in multilingual classroom settings.

Figure 7. Initial survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



Source: own elaboration

The intervention phase of the case study included a system of pedagogically structured translanguaging activities aimed at improving students’ comprehension, vocabulary retention, communicative confidence, intercultural awareness, and classroom participation in L2 (English) and L3 (German/Romanian) instruction. The activities were designed specifically for the focus group of multilingual students and implemented during the eight-week intervention. Meanwhile, the control group, consisting of students from predominantly monolingual linguistic backgrounds, continued with traditional approaches to teaching English and German/Romanian.

Cross-linguistic grammar comparison aimed to facilitate comprehension of grammatical structures by comparing English, German/Romanian, Ukrainian, and other known languages. The teachers participating in the experiment introduced a grammatical structure in the target language, and the students then compared sentence patterns across languages. The learners were asked to identify similarities and differences in: word order, tense formation, articles, modal verbs and prepositions. For example, the English Present Perfect was compared to the German Perfekt (with students whose native language was German), the Romanian equivalent of this tense (with students whose native language was Romanian), and Ukrainian past constructions. The *translanguaging element* in this strategy consisted of a classroom activity in which students discussed explanations in Ukrainian,

Hungarian, Slovak, or Romanian before producing answers in the target language. The expected outcome of this activity was improved grammar comprehension and deeper metalinguistic awareness.

Multilingual vocabulary mapping was applied during the intervention phase of the experiment to improve students' vocabulary retention through multilingual lexical associations. The students created multilingual vocabulary maps in which new lexical items are linked to equivalents or associations in other languages they know. Learners were asked to classify vocabulary according to themes or semantic fields. For example, within the topic "Travel", the students compared words such as *journey* (English), *Reise* (German), *подорож* (Ukrainian), *voiaj* (Romanian), *utazás* (Hungarian), *cestovanie* (Slovakian), etc. The expected result of the activity was an increase in students' ability to retain new vocabulary and use it flexibly in different contexts.

Translanguaging group discussions were introduced into the procedures of foreign language classes to increase students' classroom participation and communicative confidence. The learners were supposed to work in multilingual groups, being instructed that initial discussions of ideas could take place in mixed languages, but the final presentation should be delivered in the target language. The discussion topics were as follows: "Cultural traditions," "Education systems," "Student life," and "Cross-border communication." The translanguaging element in this educational activity was flexible language use during planning and collaborative interaction, applied to reduce speaking anxiety and increase learner engagement.

Multilingual scaffolding activities were implemented to facilitate students' comprehension of complex texts, instructions, and linguistic concepts in English and German/Romanian classes. As part of these activities, the instructors provided bilingual glossaries, multilingual keyword lists, parallel explanations, and visual aids incorporating multilingual support. Reading comprehension tasks were supplemented with English–German–Ukrainian or English–Romanian–Ukrainian vocabulary lists and multilingual annotations to assist learners in processing unfamiliar lexical and grammatical material. The translanguaging component of these activities involved the strategic use of students' stronger languages as cognitive and linguistic resources for constructing meaning in the target language. The expected outcome of these activities was enhanced reading comprehension, improved understanding of task instructions, and more successful completion of learning tasks.

Collaborative translation and mediation tasks were incorporated into the intervention phase to develop students' mediation skills and intercultural communicative competence. During these activities, students worked collaboratively to translate short dialogues, instructions, and text summaries between the languages involved in the study. They were encouraged to explain meanings, clarify concepts, and negotiate understanding with their peers by drawing on multiple languages within their linguistic repertoires. For example, students summarised a German text in English and discussed complex vocabulary or culturally specific concepts in Ukrainian, Hungarian, or other languages they were familiar with. The translanguaging component of these tasks involved purposeful movement between

languages to facilitate meaning-making, interpretation, and communication. By using several languages, learners were able to compare linguistic structures, bridge knowledge gaps, and support one another's understanding.

Multilingual role-play activities were implemented during the intervention phase to foster students' spontaneous communication skills in multilingual and intercultural contexts. These activities required learners to participate in simulated real-life situations involving communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Students engaged in role-plays based on scenarios such as tourist interactions, international student exchanges, border-crossing communication, and multilingual workplace encounters. During the preparation stage, learners were encouraged to discuss ideas, negotiate roles, and plan communicative strategies using the languages available within their linguistic repertoires. The role-play performances themselves, however, were conducted primarily in the target language (English or German/Romanian), allowing students to apply previously acquired linguistic knowledge in meaningful communicative situations. These activities were expected to increase learners' communicative confidence, promote active participation, reduce speaking anxiety, and enhance interactional fluency in foreign language communication.

Intercultural comparison tasks were incorporated into the intervention phase to foster students' intercultural awareness through multilingual interaction and reflection. These activities required learners to compare cultural concepts, idiomatic expressions, traditions, values, and communicative norms represented in the languages involved in the study. Students analysed similarities and differences in greetings, politeness strategies, idiomatic expressions, and classroom communication styles across English, German/Romanian, Ukrainian, and other languages they were familiar with. Through guided discussions and collaborative tasks, learners were encouraged to draw on their multilingual knowledge to explore how language reflects cultural perspectives and social practices. The translinguaging component of these activities involved examining and interpreting cultural meanings through multiple linguistic lenses, enabling students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires as resources for intercultural understanding. These activities were expected to enhance students' intercultural communicative competence, deepen their awareness of cultural diversity, and foster greater cultural sensitivity and respect for different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

At the final stage of the classroom experiment, conducted at the end of the eighth week, students in both the focus and control groups completed a comprehensive written test assessing vocabulary and grammar, as well as an oral communicative test. These instruments were designed to evaluate the students' communicative, lexical, and grammatical competence in foreign languages following the experimental intervention. Vocabulary and grammar tests were constructed according to the learning objectives of the course and aligned with CEFR B1 descriptors. Oral performance was assessed using an analytical rubric evaluating fluency, grammatical accuracy, lexical range, pronunciation, and interaction. Two independent language instructors evaluated the oral performances using the same assessment rubric.

A summary of the final test results is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of students' performance on the final complex test

Level of students' communicative, vocabulary and grammar competence	Focus group Final test		Control group Final test	
	Number of students	%	Number of students	%
High	6	35.29	3	17.65
Sufficient	8	47.06	8	47.06
Average	3	17.65	5	29.42
Low	0	0	1	5.87

Source: own elaboration

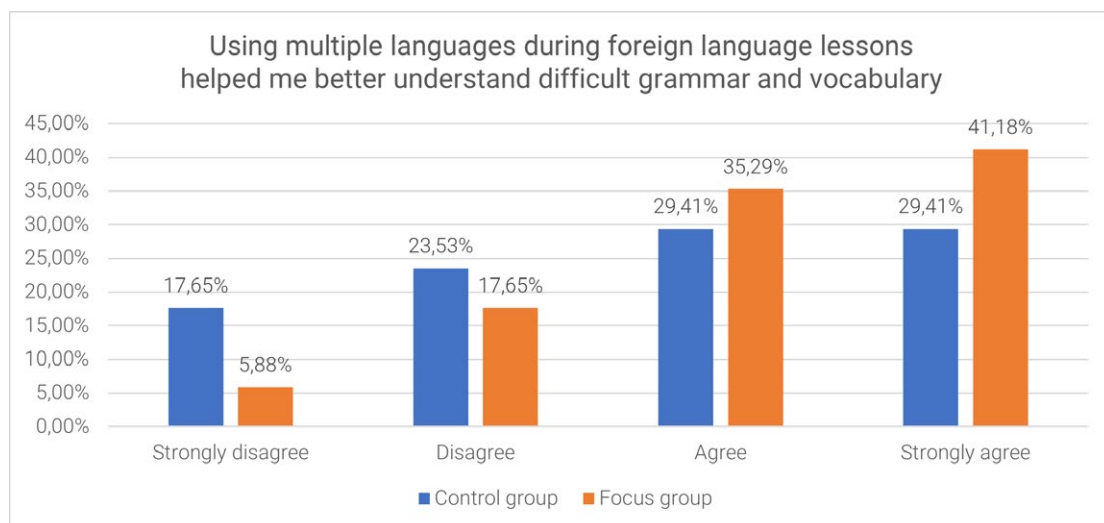
The results of the final complex test reveal notable differences between the focus group and the control group in terms of students' communicative, vocabulary, and grammar competence following the intervention. The findings indicate that students in the focus group, who participated in translanguaging-based instructional activities, achieved better overall results than those in the control group. The proportion of students demonstrating a high level of competence was twice as large in the focus group (35.29%) as in the control group (17.65%). At the same time, no students in the focus group were classified as having a low level of competence, whereas 5.87% of students in the control group were.

Although both groups had an equal proportion of students at the sufficient level (47.06%), the focus group showed a more favourable overall distribution, with fewer students at the average level and none at the low level. These outcomes suggest that integrating pedagogically structured translanguaging practices positively affected students' communicative performance, vocabulary development, and grammatical competence.

The results of the final test support the case study's core idea and confirm the research hypothesis that translanguaging can enhance learner engagement and facilitate more effective foreign language learning in multilingual university classrooms. The findings indicate that students who were encouraged to draw on their full linguistic repertoires achieved higher levels of language competence than those who received traditional target-language-only instruction.

At the final stage of the case study, the questionnaire was administered to students in both the focus and control groups. The aim was to assess the effects of the translanguaging intervention on students' attitudes toward multilingual instruction, communicative confidence, classroom participation, and perceived effectiveness of translanguaging strategies in foreign language learning. Additionally, the survey provided an opportunity to collect students' reflections on their learning experiences during the intervention phase.

Figure 8. Final survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



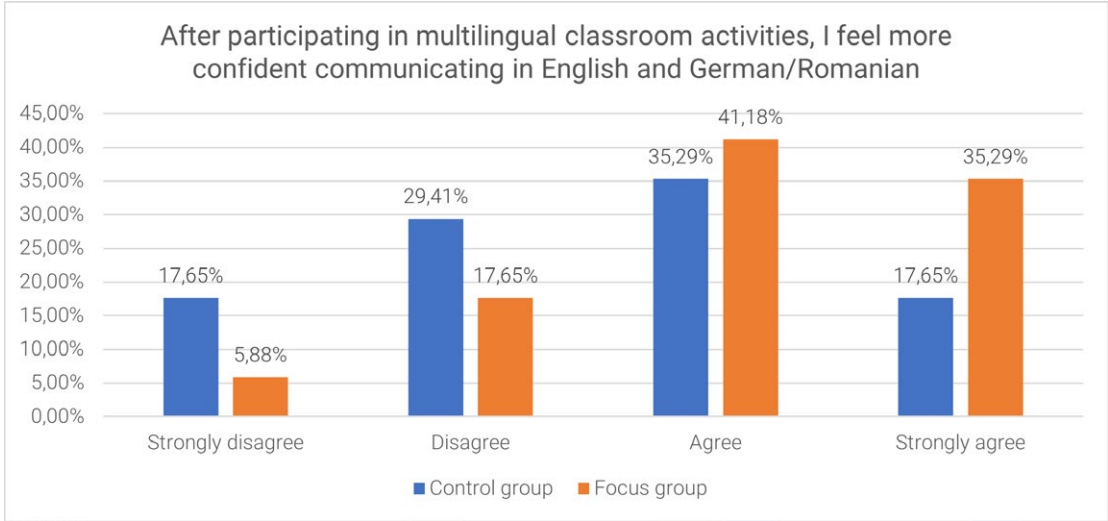
Source: own elaboration

The results provided in Figure 8 indicate that students in the focus group evaluated the role of multilingual instruction in understanding difficult grammar and vocabulary more positively than students in the control group. In the focus group, 76.47% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that using multiple languages helped them better understand difficult grammar and vocabulary, compared with 58.82% in the control group. At the same time, the proportion of negative responses was considerably lower in the focus group (23.53%) than in the control group (41.18%).

A substantial majority of students in the focus group (76.47%) agreed or strongly agreed that multilingual classroom activities increased their confidence in communicating in English and German/Romanian, compared to 52.94% in the control group. Conversely, negative responses were less frequent in the focus group (23.53%) than in the control group (47.06%) (See Figure 9).

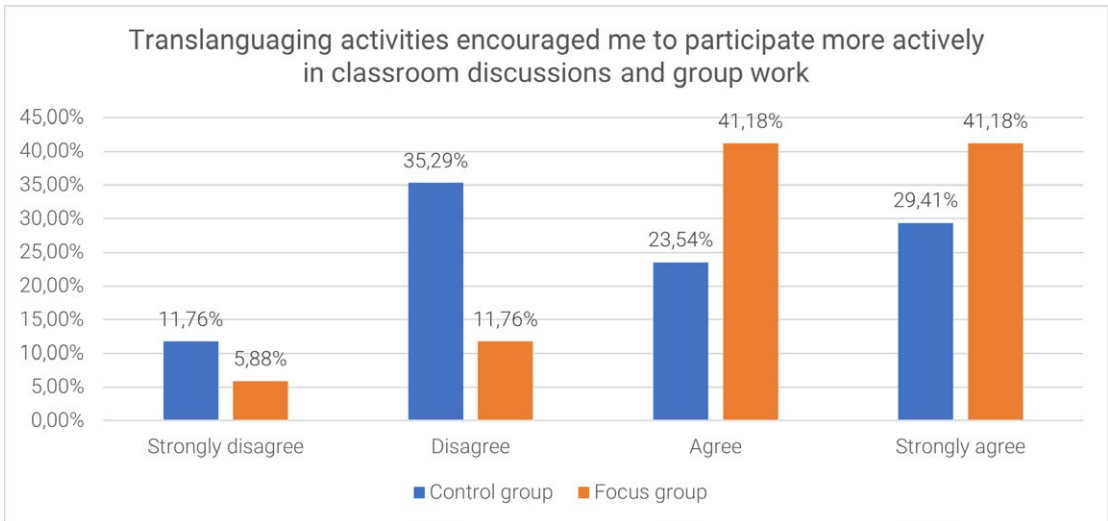
The results in Figure 10 indicate that students in the focus group perceived translanguaging activities as more effective at promoting classroom participation than those in the control group. In the focus group, 82.36% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that translanguaging activities encouraged them to participate more actively in classroom discussions and group work, compared to 52.95% in the control group. The proportion of negative responses was also considerably lower in the focus group (17.64%) than in the control group (47.02%).

Figure 9. Final survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



Source: own elaboration

Figure 10. Final survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))

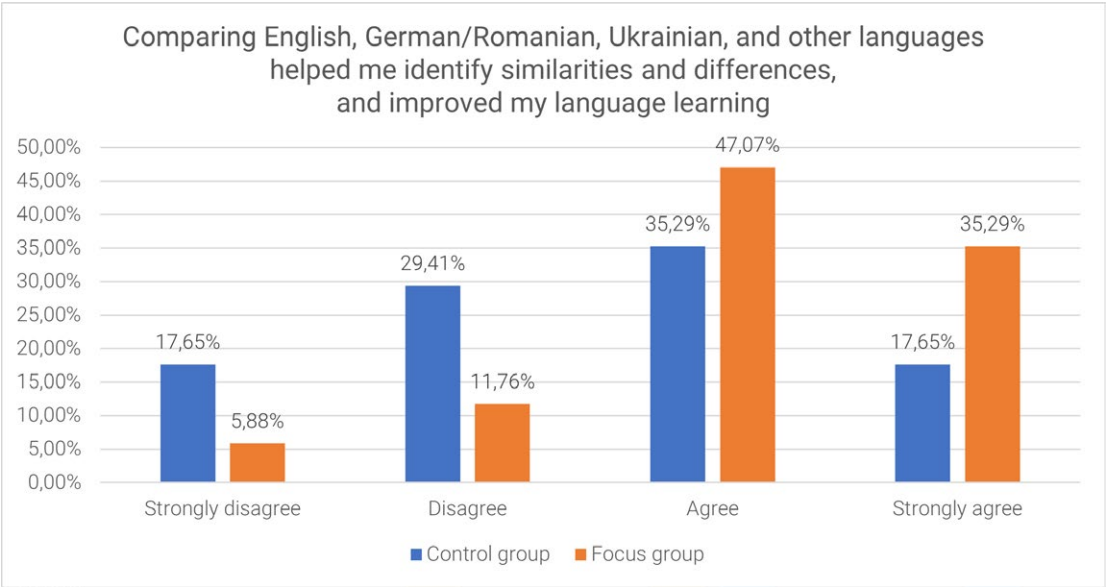


Source: own elaboration

Students in the focus group held more positive views on the value of cross-linguistic comparison for language learning than students in the control group (See Figure 11). In the focus group, 82.36% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that comparing English, German/Romanian, Ukrainian, and other languages helped them identify linguistic

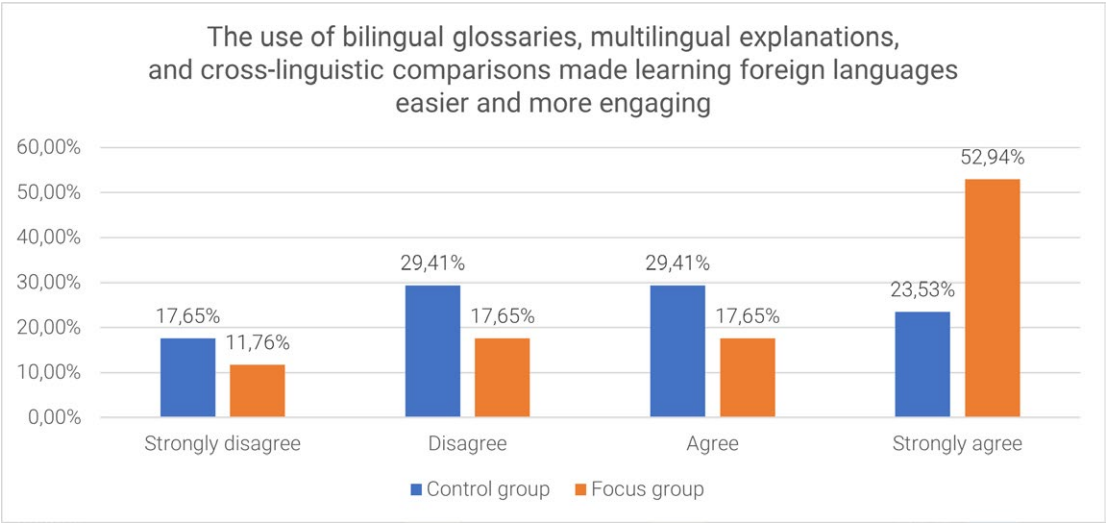
similarities and differences and improved their language learning, compared to 52.94% in the control group. Negative responses were also less frequent in the focus group (17.64%) than in the control group (47.06%).

Figure 11. Final survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



Source: own elaboration

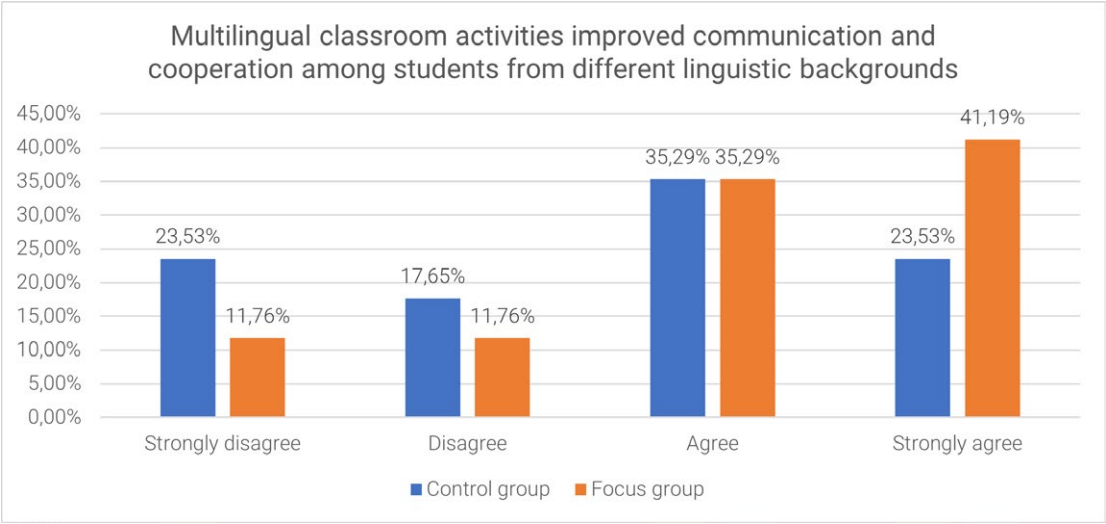
Figure 12. Final survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



Source: own elaboration

As indicated in Figure 12, students in the focus group perceived multilingual support strategies as more beneficial for foreign language learning than students in the control group. In the focus group, 70.59% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that bilingual glossaries, multilingual explanations, and cross-linguistic comparisons made learning foreign languages easier and more engaging, compared to 52.94% in the control group.

Figure 13. Final survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))

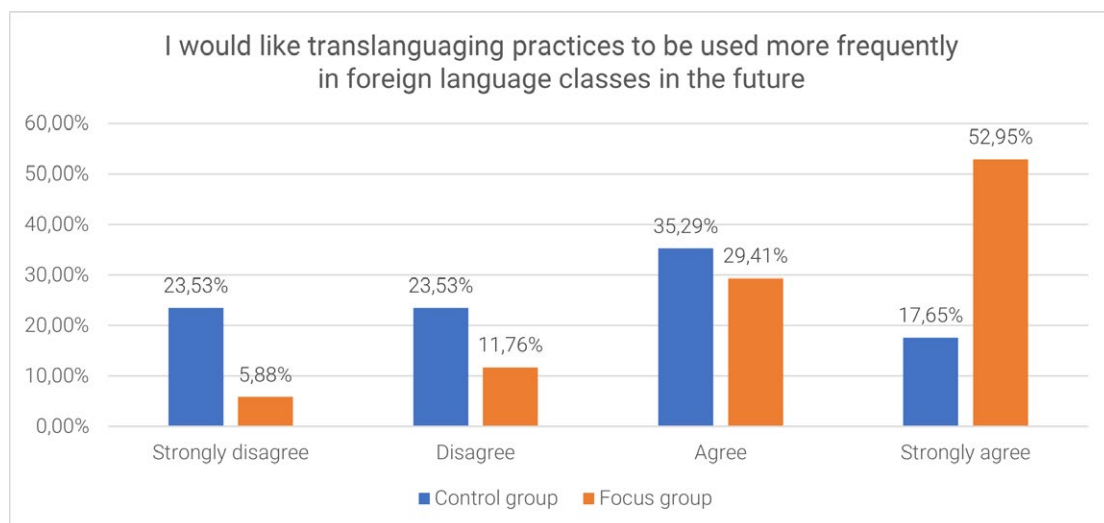


Source: own elaboration

Students in the focus group viewed multilingual classroom activities as more effective in fostering communication and cooperation than students in the control group (See Figure 13). Overall, 76.48% of students in the focus group agreed or strongly agreed that multilingual classroom activities improved communication and cooperation among learners from different linguistic backgrounds, compared to 58.82% in the control group. The proportion of negative responses was also substantially lower in the focus group (23.52%) than in the control group (41.18%).

The results shown in Figure 14 indicate a stronger preference for the future use of translanguageing practices among students in the focus group than among those in the control group. In the focus group, 82.36% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that translanguageing practices should be used more frequently in future foreign language classes, compared to 52.94% in the control group. These findings suggest that students who experienced the translanguageing intervention developed highly positive attitudes toward multilingual instruction and recognised its value for foreign language learning, thereby confirming the effectiveness and acceptability of translanguageing practices in multilingual classrooms.

Figure 14. Final survey conducted in the control group and in the focus group presented as percentages of the total number of responses (N=34, N=17 (control), N=17 (focus))



Source: own elaboration

Conclusion

The present case study investigated the effectiveness of pedagogically structured translanguageing practices in multilingual university foreign language classrooms in Zakarpattia, a multilingual cross-border region of Ukraine. The research was grounded in contemporary theories of Border Studies and multilingual education, which view borders as spaces of interaction and languages as dynamic, interconnected resources rather than separate and fixed systems. Within this framework, translanguageing is understood as the flexible use of learners' complete linguistic repertoires to support communication, learning, and meaning-making. The theoretical analysis demonstrated that translanguageing challenges traditional monolingual approaches to language education and promotes more inclusive and effective learning environments. Previous research has shown that translanguageing can enhance comprehension, language awareness, learner participation, communicative confidence, and intercultural competence. It has been demonstrated that translanguageing should not be viewed as a temporary pedagogical strategy but as a continuous and dynamic classroom practice that fosters multilingual competence within and beyond formal education.

The case study findings support these theoretical assumptions. The preliminary teacher questionnaire revealed positive attitudes toward translanguageing and highlighted its value for explaining complex linguistic material, increasing student participation, and reducing anxiety. The results of the initial and final student questionnaires showed that students exposed to translanguageing practices held more positive attitudes toward multilingual instruction and perceived clear benefits in comprehension, vocabulary learning,

communicative confidence, classroom participation, and peer cooperation. The results of the final complex test further confirmed the intervention's effectiveness. Students in the focus group achieved higher levels of communicative, lexical, and grammatical competence than those in the control group, with a larger proportion demonstrating high achievement and none demonstrating low achievement.

The study confirms the hypothesis that pedagogically structured translanguaging practices contribute to greater learner engagement, improved comprehension, enhanced vocabulary retention, and increased communicative confidence compared to traditional monolingual instruction. The findings suggest that translanguaging is a valuable pedagogical resource in multilingual university classrooms, particularly in border and cross-border regions where linguistic diversity is an integral part of students' everyday lives. Although the present study provides valuable insights into the implementation of pedagogically structured translanguaging practices, several limitations should be acknowledged. Because intact classes rather than randomly assigned participants were used, causal conclusions should be interpreted with caution. While baseline equivalence between the groups was established through pre-testing and common instructional objectives, the relatively small sample size and the short duration of the intervention limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should therefore employ random assignment where feasible, involve larger and more diverse samples, and adopt longitudinal research designs to examine the long-term effects of translanguaging on language development and intercultural competence.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide empirical support for integrating pedagogically structured translanguaging into foreign language education in multilingual university contexts. The study contributes to the growing body of evidence that translanguaging can enhance learner engagement, comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, communicative confidence, and classroom interaction, while underscoring the need for further research into its sustained educational impact across diverse multilingual settings.

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The 'Linguistic Borderscape' as an Analytical Framework for Studying Linguistic Hybridity in Border Regions

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Abstract

This article proposes a new conceptual framework for analysing linguistic phenomena in border regions, drawing on examples from the Polish-German borderland. Although language constitutes one of the key dimensions of cross-border interaction, linguistic relations have remained relatively underexplored within border studies. To address this gap, the paper introduces the Model of Border Integration, which combines insights from sociology and border studies and enables the analysis of linguistic dynamics in relation to varying degrees of durability, permeability, and hybridity, characteristic of border regions. Within this framework, particular attention is devoted to the concept of the 'linguistic borderscape' (*linguistische Grenzschaft*), understood as a hybrid zone where linguistic landscape, language policy, and language contact intersect and mutually shape one another. The paper is based on the assumption that multilingualism and multiculturalism tend to manifest more intensely in permeable borderlands than in inland areas. Border regions are therefore conceptualised as "language laboratories" in which communicative practices, linguistic norms, and symbolic representations are constantly negotiated and transformed through sustained intercultural contact. Inspired by the concept of the borderscape, the study examines how hybrid linguistic realities emerge and develop in cross-border contexts. The analysis focuses on three interrelated domains: (1) the linguistic landscape of border towns and villages, including public signage and commercial communication; (2) the development of language policy and planning, such as bilingual education and multilingual public services; and (3) the communication practices of border inhabitants and service-sector providers. The findings demonstrate that hybridity in border regions is not an exceptional phenomenon but rather a constitutive feature of the communicative ecology of permeable borderlands. The article argues that the concept of the linguistic borderscape offers a valuable heuristic and methodological tool for the study of multilingualism in border areas and highlights the role of borderlands as spaces of linguistic negotiation, adaptation, and innovation.

Keywords: Linguistic Borderscape, Model of Border Integration, Languages and Borderlands

Introduction

This paper introduces and analyses a new conceptual framework for the study of linguistic phenomena in border regions, drawing on examples from the Polish-German borderland. The issues of language and language contact have not received much attention in border studies, even though it is undeniable that language is one of the key elements enabling mutual understanding between the two sides. Language relations and questions of bilingualism appear to be crucial for defining power relations between neighbours and often influence local policies. To close this research gap, the author introduces the ‘Model of Border Integration,’ which combines sociological theories with border studies and can be applied to the study of linguistic relations in border contexts. It was developed to account for the varying degrees of permeability, hybridity, and durability that characterise border-related linguistic dynamics. Within this model, special emphasis is placed on a distinct zone of integration termed the ‘linguistic borderscape’ (linguistische Grenzschaft), an analytical category referring to hybrid phenomena in the areas of language contact, linguistic landscape, and language policy (Jańczak, 2024).

The premise underlying this investigation is that processes of multiculturalism and multilingualism manifest with greater intensity in permeable border regions than in inland areas. The author writes these words while remaining fully aware of the changing global dynamics (migration crises, pandemics, military conflicts, and shifting power relations), which significantly trigger processes of re-bordering (Popescu, 2012) and the securitisation of borders (Baker-Beall, 2019). These processes are also observable within the EU, calling into question the future of the integration project and the four freedoms of the EU. Despite these obstacles, the European project continues to function, and communities living on both sides of permeable borders are, to a greater or lesser extent, “destined” to function together (often as one organism). Borderlands, especially those marked by permeable or even fluid boundaries, become fertile grounds for hybridisation and contact-induced change. In this sense, they function as ‘language laboratories’, spaces where communicative behaviour, linguistic norms, and symbolic landscapes are constantly negotiated, reshaped, and challenged. This idea draws on the conceptualisation of border regions as cultural laboratories, as discussed by García Canclini (1999) and Gasparini (1999/2000), and it emphasises the transformative potential of sustained interlingual and intercultural contact. Building on this foundational perspective, the paper proposes the concept of the ‘linguistic borderscape’, drawing inspiration from Perera’s (2007) notion of the ‘borderscape’ as a dynamic, spatially and temporally complex formation. In the linguistic adaptation of this concept, borderscapes are understood as zones where linguistic and cultural boundaries do not merely intersect but also merge, producing hybrid constellations of practice and representation.

In particular, the study investigates the following research questions:

1. How is the linguistic borderscape manifested in the linguistic landscape of border towns and villages? The analysis explores how public signage, street names, commercial advertisements, and informational displays reflect the syncretism characteristic of the border region.
2. In what ways do borderlands influence the development of unique solutions in language policy and planning? This paper discusses flexible curricula, bilingual service provision, and the implementation of language offerings in schools, all of which reflect the hybridity of the social environment.
3. What are the manifestations of hybridisation in the language behaviour of the border population? Drawing on previous research by the author, the study identifies communication strategies employed by border residents and/or service-sector workers that transcend clear language boundaries, including practices such as code-switching and language mixing.

The empirical examples presented throughout this article are intended as illustrative applications of the proposed ‘linguistic borderscape’ model rather than as independent case studies. They are drawn from fieldwork conducted on the Polish–German border during the research underpinning the author’s monograph (2024) and serve to demonstrate the analytical potential of the model across different dimensions of border-related language phenomena.

The ‘Linguistic Borderscape’ in the ‘Model of Border Integration’ – An Integrative Perspective¹

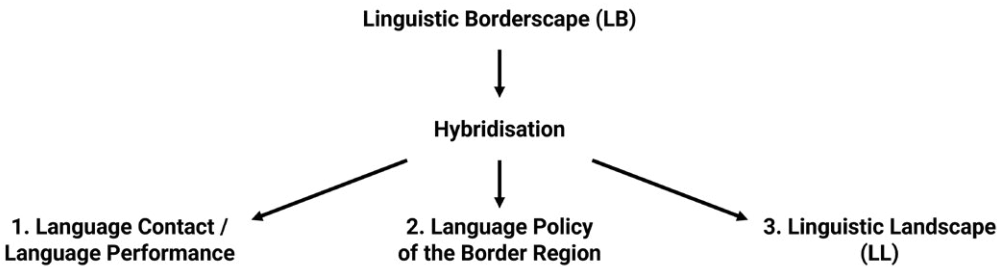
As mentioned in the introduction, this chapter will describe and analyse a new concept, namely the ‘Model of Border Integration’. It conceptualises borders not simply as lines of division but as zones of varying degrees of permeability and hybridity. Accordingly, it differentiates between three types of border zones: (a) zone of separation, marked by linguistic and cultural insulation; (b) zone of interaction, where coordinated cross-border cooperation takes place; and (c) zone of linguistic borderscape, where overlapping and diffuse interactions generate new language practices and meanings. This zone offers insights into both the challenges and creative potential of language use in transnational contexts.

Particular attention is given to the zone of the linguistic borderscape, which illustrates processes of hybridisation. The concept is based on the assumption that a permeable border contributes to the emergence of cultural and linguistic hybridity. The linguistic

1 This chapter is, with the publisher’s permission, a translated and slightly revised and updated version of a chapter from the author’s book, originally published in German; Jańczak, B. A. (2024). *Linguistische Grenzschaft’ als eine analytische Kategorie. Sprachkontakt des deutsch-polnischen Grenzgebietes*. Göttingen: Brill | V&R unipress, pp. 127–145. To date, no English-language article on this topic has been published.

borderscape encompasses a range of hybrid phenomena observable in three key domains: (1) language contact, which includes mixed-language communication routines and code-switching practices; (2) linguistic landscape, encompassing hybrid signage and spatial semiotics that reflect cross-border entanglements; and (3) language policy and planning, referring to unique, often piecemeal, institutional solutions in education. These phenomena are not treated as isolated or incidental but are analysed as mutually reinforcing components of a broader syncretic system shaped by the social, political, and linguistic permeability of the border itself.

Figure 1: Fields of Reference of the Linguistic Borderscape²



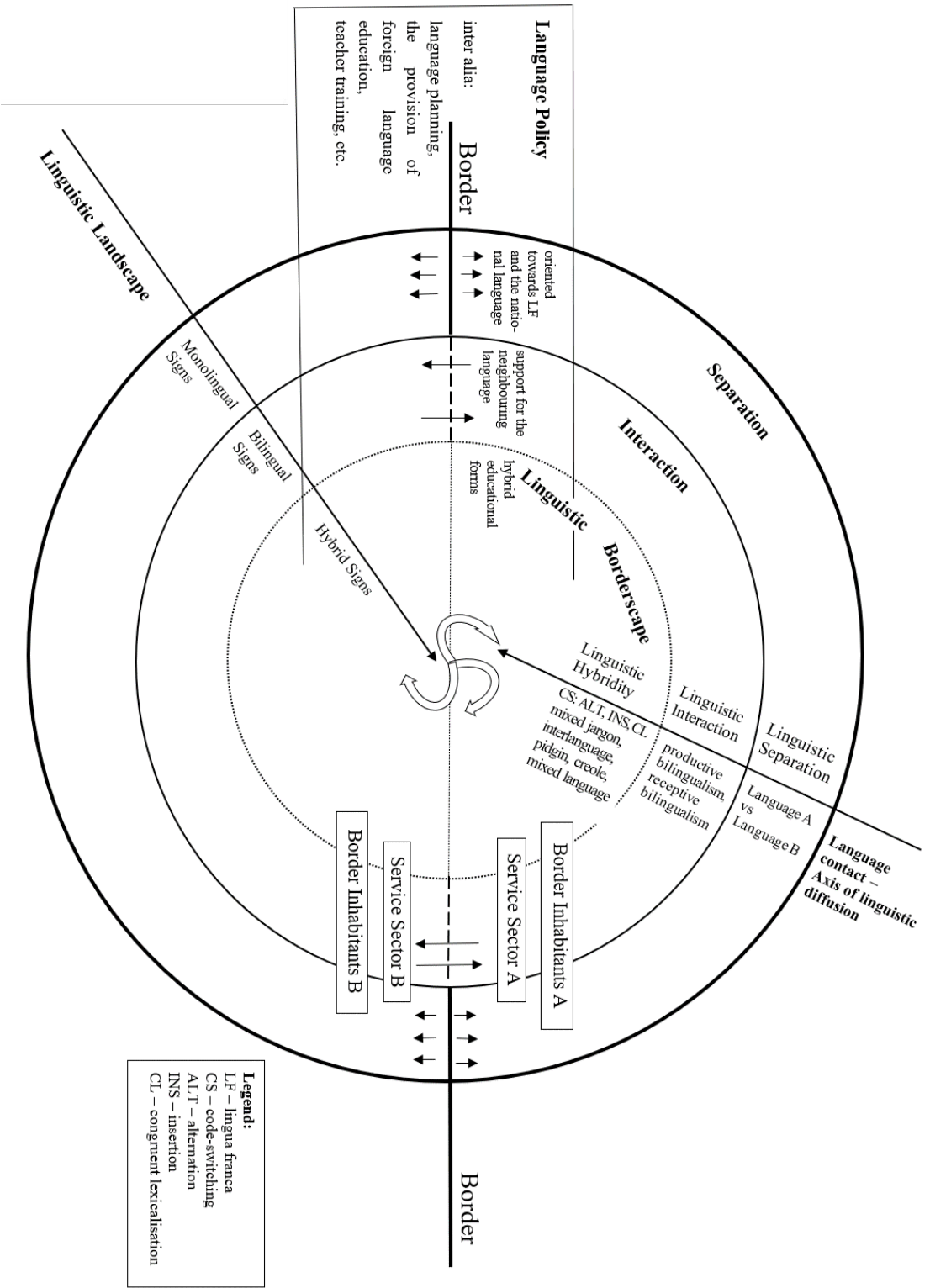
It should be emphasised that hybridisation occurs across all three dimensions (language contact, language policy and linguistic landscape) and can contribute to the emergence of a linguistic borderscape. The above-mentioned reference domains are interconnected to a certain extent.

Different zones of border integration are represented in Figure 2 by three circles. At the centre of these circles runs the border, which is characterised as durable in the first (outer) circle, permeable in the second (middle) circle, and hybrid in the third (inner) circle. Hybridisation thus constitutes the innermost stage within the linguistic “ecosystem” of border regions.

Living in the border area does not necessarily translate into cross-border contacts. This fact is visualised by the first, outer circle. It indicates the separation of language policy (e.g., with regard to the language education provision), the linguistic landscape (e.g., monolingual signs), and the language behaviour of border residents living in the border region (e.g., communication strategies based on an insistence on their own mother tongue). Even if it may seem unintelligible to the reader, a large number of border residents live exclusively within their own national, linguistic, and cultural community and refrain from contact with the other side. This form of demarcation suggests the existence of a zone in which the influence of the border on the processes taking place within it is reduced to a minimum. The existence of minimal contact with the other side cannot be entirely eliminated. Even if border residents A never visit the other side of the border, they may be sporadically exposed to contact, for example through chance encounters with border residents B. In the circle of separation, border residents speak their own national language. They have no

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all tables and figures are the author’s own work.

Figure 2: Model of Border Integration



or only minimal contact with their neighbours and thus with the neighbouring language. Language policy is nationally oriented and focuses on the needs of the local border population (without regard to the border region as a single unit). The foreign language education provision concentrates on the promotion of the most popular foreign languages, lingua franca (marked as LF in the figure). In most cases, this will mean the promotion of English, and in some further cases Spanish, French, or Chinese (depending on the national and, in some cases, such as the European Union, supranational language policy of the respective state or community). The neighbouring language, if offered at all, is taught in the form of typical foreign language instruction. Advertising and informational signs are presented monolingually in the national language.

The middle circle, in which the border becomes permeable, constitutes the zone of interaction. Here, cultural and linguistic exchange between neighbouring countries takes place. In the dimension of language policy, support for the neighbouring language is advocated. This occurs, among other things, through the promotion of bilingual education in the neighbouring language, the establishment of bilingual educational institutions or branches, and bilingual teacher training. In the linguistic landscape, this permeability is manifested, for example, through bilingual signs or advertising displays. Border residents or employees in the service sector try maintaining contacts with their neighbours. They strive to learn the neighbouring language (at least receptively). Some, thanks to their advanced knowledge of the neighbouring language, even choose the partner language as their interlingual communication strategy. Those who are confronted with foreign neighbours and do not speak the neighbouring language (due to different circumstances) employ supportive communication strategies (mime, appeal for assistance).

The inner circle marks the existence of a linguistic borderscape, which manifests itself as hybridity. It is likely the smallest zone, characterised by a syncretic nature. It is important to emphasise here that hybridity is an umbrella term for many phenomena that originate from, or result in, a shared participation. With regard to language policy, hybrid educational forms are introduced that are only possible due to the border situation and its permeability. Proximity to the border can, among other things, enable Content and Language Integrated Learning instruction (CLIL, cf. Marsh, 1994) in mixed, cross-border established classes or regular teacher exchanges on a rotational basis. In terms of the linguistic landscape, hybridity becomes visible on information signs and advertising boards that, among other things, include mixed-language neologisms and linguistic blends. It should be noted that these are mostly unofficial signs, which are often even attributable to happenings or artistic initiatives. Regarding language contact, the mixing and hybridisation of linguistic systems can be observed. This is characterised by the routine use of code-switching (alternation [ALT], insertion [INS], congruent lexicalisation [CL]) as well as by the use of mixed jargon, interlanguage, or even the existence of pidgin, creole, or mixed languages in certain groups of border residents. The outcome of language contact, resulting in a given form of communication, depends on many factors defining a particular border region, such as social asymmetries, the shared history of speakers A and B (duration of coexistence, frequency of contacts), the linguistic prestige of languages A and B, etc.

It must be emphasised that the three circles operate side by side in border regions. However, the question arises as to their relative size. Unlike suggested in the schematic representation, the size of the zones marked by the circles and their impact on border reality can and does vary, and depends, among other things, on border permeability and border asymmetries. In border regions where the border has a durable character, the circle of separation will dominate; the circle of interaction will, if present at all, be minimal, and the circle of hybridity will most likely not occur. The more diffused the border, the greater the share of interaction and hybridity in cross-border contacts.

In the following, hybridisation is once again summarised with reference to the three domains (language policy, linguistic landscape, and language contact). To help the reader better navigate the concept, all three dimensions are briefly described within their respective zones of integration. We begin with language policy, followed by the linguistic landscape. Finally, the zones of border integration are discussed with particular emphasis on linguistic borderlands in relation to language contact.

Language Policy

Marten (2016, p. 15) notes that, in the context of language policy, many terms and approaches – such as ‘language policy,’ ‘language planning,’ or ‘language management’ – are used in parallel. The author also points to the “specificity” of the German scholarly tradition, which, in contrast to English terminology, for example, distinguishes between ‘Sprachpolitik’ and ‘Sprachenpolitik.’ Wright (2012, p. 61) defines language policy as a top-down process of language planning, rooted – according to the author – in the French Revolution. By contrast, McGroarty (1997, p. 1) understands the term more broadly, extending it beyond public decision-making to include social practice as well: “Language policy can be defined as the combination of official decisions and prevailing public practices related to language education and use (ibid.).”

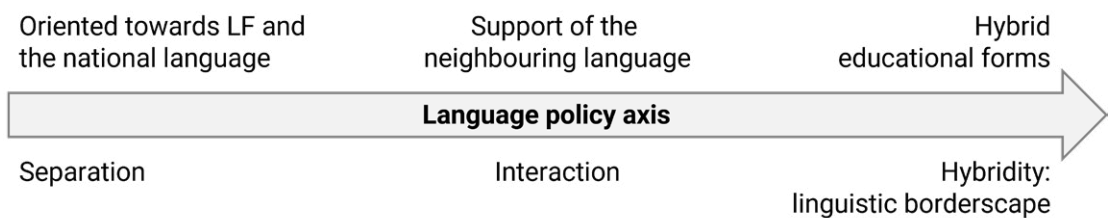
Nekvapil and Sherman (2015, p. 6) define ‘language management’ as the management of language or communication by institutions or individuals. Language management at the macro level, that is, from a top-down perspective, includes, among other things, language policy and language planning. At the micro level, language management concerns a bottom-up perspective, which is considered to be subjective (ibid.): “Language management is understood broadly, as any sort of activity aimed at language or communication, in other words, at language as a system as well as at language use [...]. These activities can be undertaken by an institution (e.g. the ministry of education, which makes decisions regarding mandatory foreign languages in a given country), but also individuals in particular interactions [...].”

Arendt (2010, p. 242) distinguishes between ‘language policy,’ ‘language planning,’ and ‘language regulation,’ whereby language regulation is manifested within language planning – and language planning, in turn, within language policy. Lisek (2014, p. 75f.), drawing on Czerwiński (2005, p. 37), proposes a model of language policy that takes into account the complexity of the relationships between its individual components. He distinguishes

between practical language policy (language planning) and language policy in the legal sense (*de iure*). These two elements interact with each other and together constitute language policy. In this context, Lisek (2014, p. 75f.) identifies three groups of actors – the state, educational institutions, and linguists – who influence one another reciprocally. Their interaction takes place across three levels: the legislative level, the educational level, and the level of corpus planning, all of which are linked to both practical and legal (*de iure*) language policy.

In this article, the term ‘language policy’ is understood as an umbrella term for all political activities *sensu largo* (that is, those relating to individual language management, language planning, and/or *de iure* language policy) in a cross-border context, regardless of whether the focus of such activities is on a single language or on the interaction of multiple languages (at least two neighbouring languages).

Figure 3: Language Policy in Relation to Border Integration Zones



Language policy that focuses exclusively on internal interests tends to contribute to the consolidation of existing borders. The separation zone includes all language policy decisions and language management measures that imply a neglect for the border’s potential for language contact. This includes, among other things, the orientation towards and promotion of the *lingua franca* (LF) and the national language(s). The promotion of a *lingua franca* (most often English) sometimes serves to reduce linguistic asymmetry (where one country is typically proficient in the partner language, while the neighbouring country is not). This language policy is then understood as an investment in redefining neighbourly relations, or at least this is how it is justified by public educational institutions (cf. Jańczak, 2017, p. 159–162). At the same time, the replacement of the neighbouring language with a globally dominant *lingua franca* may simultaneously weaken direct linguistic interdependence between neighbouring communities, thereby contributing to a gradual distancing in cross-border cooperation.

In the permeable zone of interaction, language planning provides for the promotion of neighbouring languages. This can take various forms. These include ensuring the provision of the neighbouring language in schools and kindergartens in the form of elective or compulsory language instruction. Another form is the establishment of bilingual educational institutions such as daycare centres and schools.

The zone of linguistic borderscape, the innermost level, comprises forms of cross-border cooperation that are, on the one hand, made possible only by the border location and, at the same time, partially dissolve the border as a barrier. One feasible and practised

form of a hybrid educational offer is CLIL instruction for combined binational classes, which takes place on a rotating basis alternately on either side of the border. Students from two classes – one from one side of the border (State A) and the other from the opposite side (State B) – are divided into mixed groups. Half of Class A (A1) is combined with half of Class B (B1), while the remaining students (A2 and B2) form the second group. Once a week or once a month (at regular intervals), the combined class AB1 participates in instruction on one side of the border, while AB2 attends classes on the other side. The next session then takes place in reverse, according to a rotational principle. An alternative variant is the exchange of teachers who provide instruction in their own mother tongue at the target school (on the other side of the border). In both cases, the replicability of CLIL instruction is to be ensured. Permeable and, in particular, hybrid forms of education naturally require careful language planning and the implementation of a neighbour-oriented *de iure* language policy.

Linguistic Landscape

Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 25) understand the concept of the ‘linguistic landscape’ as the visual reality of a given environment as it is represented in and through written language: “The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration.” (ibid.)

Similarly, Shohamy and Gorter (2009: 1) define the linguistic landscape as “language in the environment,” while also broadening the concept to include images: “[...] words and images displayed and exposed in public spaces...” (ibid.)

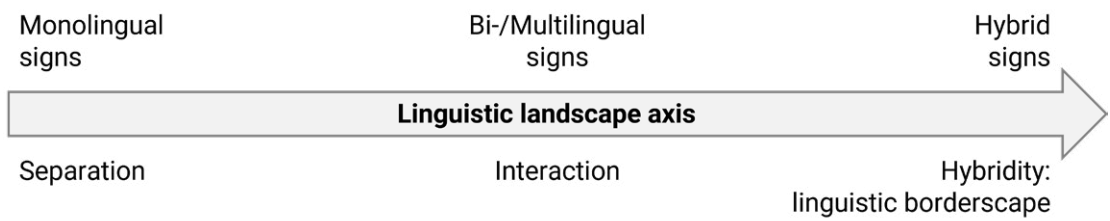
The main aim of linguistic landscape (LL) research is to describe and identify “systematic patterns of the presence and absence of languages in public spaces”, which reveal the underlying “motives, pressures, [and] ideologies” associated with their use (Linguistic Landscape, 2015, p. 1).

The linguistic landscape reflects linguistic reality, functioning both as a top-down process (language choice on all official public signage) and as a bottom-up process (language choice on signs produced by private individuals, associations, companies, etc.).

Ben-Rafael, Shohamy et al. (2006, p. 8) point to an emblematic and identity-constructing function of the linguistic landscape in communities, societies, and regions. The linguistic landscape shows two different aspects: firstly, it reveals the relationships between different social groups; secondly, it indicates the relationships between public authorities and civil society (cf. ibid., p. 9). The asymmetric and symmetric relations between the languages that constitute the linguistic landscape are, among others, the subject of studies by Puppel (2007) and Grzeškowiak (2010). The interlingual or translingual relation (cf. Puppel 2007, p. 85ff.) reflects the linguistic and political reality of the contact languages. In this context, the state border is not a necessary point of reference. As in the case of language contact and language policy, the linguistic landscape can likewise be analysed in terms of different

degrees of border integration. If Ben-Rafael, Shohamy et al.’s claim about its identity-constructing role holds (cf. *ibid.*, p. 8), the occurrence of hybrid signs suggests the presence of a hybrid identity in the border region, including at least some of its inhabitants.

Figure 4: Linguistic Landscape in Relation to Border Integration Zones



For all three cases discussed, examples from the German-Polish border region are presented. However, similar examples can be found at many other borders.

Figure 5: Signpost in Słubice, Słubice–Frankfurt (Oder) Border Crossing, Author: Jarosław Jańczak



In the zone of separation, only monolingual signs are found. They are addressed to a specific addressee group, usually the local population. The inhabitants of the other side of the border are not taken into account. An example of this is shown in Figure No. 5.

In the zone of interaction, signs are displayed that are addressed to recipients on both sides of the border.

Figure 6: Club of Young Detectives (*Klub Junger Detektive / Klub Młodych Detektywów*), Bad Muskau–Łęknica Border Crossing, Author: Barbara A. Jańczak.



Figure 7: Small Market, Zgorzelec, Author: Barbara A. Jańczak.



The signs are labelled bilingually or in multiple languages, although the languages are clearly separated. The font size may be symmetrical or asymmetrical and depends on several factors, including the assumed origin of the addressees, language policy, language attitudes, language prestige, etc.

The zone of the linguistic borderscape includes signs that mix both languages within a single message (this involves both code-switching within an utterance [a sentence or sentence equivalent] as well as mixed words and bilingual neologisms). Examples of this are shown in Figures 8 and 9.

Figure 8: The City Wall Marks the Boundary of Ślubfurt, Author: Monika Stefanek (source: URL 1).



This image illustrates that the different zones of the linguistic landscape can permeate one another. At first glance, it is evident that the sign in Frankfurt presents information in three languages – English, Polish, and German – which points to the zone of interaction. At the same time, however, the neologism “Ślubfurt” (in German and in Polish, inflected according to the respective grammatical rules) is a portmanteau created through the fusion of the proper names ‘Ślubice’ and ‘Frankfurt’. They are toponyms – *nomina propria* – which are well suited to hybridisation. The name suggests the existence of the twin city as a shared organism.

An analogous example is a large advertising poster for the study programme of the Collegium Polonicum, featuring the slogan: “radość studiowania” (the joy of studying). The Collegium Polonicum is a joint institution of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), located on the Polish side of the German-Polish border in the twin city of Ślubice-Frankfurt (Oder).

Figure 9: Photo Archive of the Public Relations Office at the Collegium Polonicum, Author: Ewa Bielewicz³



This neologism “stüdiowania” has a primarily symbolic, identity-constructing meaning that does not fully correspond to linguistic reality. The German deverbal noun “Studieren” does not contain an umlaut. However, the sign is easily identifiable for Poles as German, thus contributing to the emergence of a German–Polish hybrid form. At the same time, the umlaut can also be interpreted as a smiley, especially since the word refers to “radość,” i.e. joy.

Language Contact and Language Performance

Language contact refers to the direct interaction between two or more languages on either an individual or a collective level and results in processes of linguistic convergence and divergence (Martinet, 1968, p. XI). Many approaches in language contact research focus primarily on the contact situation itself, understood as a dynamic process in which the linguistic and cultural experiences of different groups become visible (Kawazoe Takano, 2015, p. 119). Research on language contact encompasses a variety of perspectives, ranging from studies of specific contact situations and comparative analyses of larger linguistic areas to investigations of the potentially negative effects of language contact (Hasselblatt, de Jonge & Norde, 2010, p. 1). At the same time, scholars point out that no

3 The faces of the female students were intentionally blurred, Barbara A. Jańczak.

universally applicable model of language contact has yet been developed, and that the study of new or typologically different language pairs remains highly relevant (Jahr, 1992, p. 1; Matras 2009, p. 2). Factors such as space, time, and legal frameworks are also crucial for the analysis of language contact processes, as they significantly influence the intensity and forms of linguistic interaction (Tabouret-Keller 1992, p. 182ff.). Within contemporary language contact research, Gugenberger (2011, p. 12–16) particularly emphasises the shift from mono- to transcultural perspectives, in which multilingualism, hybridity, and mixed-language practices increasingly come to the fore. In summary, it can be argued that the transitive character of borders contributes to the dynamics and intensification of cross-border language contact. Ludwig (2010, p. 104) highlights openness to contact as a source of emergent hybrid contact varieties.

The characteristics of linguistic border integration with regard to language contact phenomena can be represented along the language contact axis.

Figure 10: Language Contact in Relation to Border Integration Zones



Assigning language contact phenomena to the respective zone of border integration is not a simple task. First, it must be noted that the speaker’s behaviour in a communicative situation, and thus the use of possible strategies, may at least partly be a result of the available language competence. Thus, the linguistic action of a given speaker often results from the language constellation, the communicative possibilities arising from linguistic competence, and the communicative strategies employed. A response in the speaker’s respective mother tongue is not always a sign of separation – especially not when the speaker continues to demonstrate cooperative behaviour in their interaction.

The durable border zone, which is associated with the separation of linguistic systems and the restriction of language contact, presupposes the use of one’s own mother tongue in communication with speakers from the other side of the border without any effort to ensure communicative success. In this context, the linguistic behaviour of border residents proves to be non-solidary. Either a speaker deliberately chooses not to use a shared language of communication (this can occur, among other things, when the speaker holds a negative attitude towards the neighbouring language and the neighbouring country, see Jańczak, 2018, p. 244f.), or they implement communication strategies that are

uncooperative (avoidance strategy). As mentioned earlier, the use of one's own mother tongue does not necessarily imply separation. If other communication strategies are employed, linguistic behaviour is classified as interactive and cooperative.

In the zone of linguistic interaction, coordination of language contact takes place. The permeability of borders often, though not always, manifests itself in knowledge of the neighbouring language and its use as a communicative instrument. One or both interlocutors may be communicatively competent in the neighbouring language. This results from asymmetrical or symmetrical language contact. In the case of competent bilingualism, the choice of the partner's language is one of the possible communication strategies. In this case, one interlocutor may speak in the neighbouring language while the other uses their own language – or both may speak in the neighbouring language. However, it is also possible that, despite a high level of competence in the partner language, the interlocutors choose a third language. In the case of limited linguistic competence on the part of both partners, communication may be based, among other things, on receptive bilingualism (if both sides understand the other language). If this is not the case, the language must be simplified and supported by additional means (mime, gesture). Border residents who do not master the neighbouring language often choose another language (a third language) as a means of communication. Those who have no knowledge of foreign languages at all at least try to maintain the conversation in their own language and to overcome the “problem” of communicative breakdown. Communication strategies that do not require language proficiency often serve as support (mime and gesture, requests for assistance – usually from third parties, or paraphrasing).

When linguistic boundaries become diffuse and syncretic, communication resulting from language contact undergoes hybridisation. The linguistic borderscape is characterised by hybridity and by the use of mixed language routines, manifested in code-switching (alternation – ALT, insertion – INS, congruent lexicalisation – CL), a mixed jargon or interlanguage, or even the existence of a pidgin, creole, or mixed language. As the model of border integration is intended to have general applicability and is not limited solely to the German-Polish case, various contact-induced mixed languages, language varieties, and linguistic registers are assigned to the zone of the linguistic borderscape.

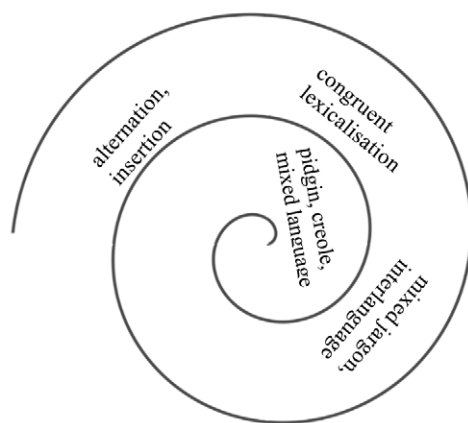
Gugenberger (2011, p. 25) identifies five possible hybridisation strategies employed by bi- and multilingual speakers within an interlingual/translingual space:

1. One utterance – one language: An utterance is produced in one language, while another utterance is produced in a different language.
2. Hybrid utterance: Within a single utterance, sequences in one language are combined with sequences in another language.
3. Combination of lexical and grammatical morphemes: Morphemes from two or more languages are combined, resulting in the emergence of hybrid words and phrases. This strategy also takes into account the combination of morphosyntactic and semantic patterns.

4. Linking phonetic-phonological and/or prosodic features of two or more languages.
5. Alignment of linguistic and cultural patterns: Speakers synchronise and intertwine the “pragmatic-communicative and cultural patterns of the languages and cultures involved” (ibid., translated by B. A. J.). This strategy consists in a broader consideration of the consequences of language contact, one that also takes into account an extralinguistic perspective.

The strategies do not necessarily exclude one another, and their use varies between speakers. Following Gugenberger’s understanding of hybridisation as an umbrella concept, I employ the term ‘linguistic borderscape’ in a broad sense, focusing on the degree of advancement of language-switching phenomena. Code-switching becomes a communicative strategy, and the extent of mixing indicates the progression of hybridisation within the spiral of hybridisation. With regard to language contact, linguistic borderscape thus functions as an overarching concept encompassing all mixed-language modes of communication resulting from the simultaneous use of both languages. It should, however, be noted that some communicative routines may be more hybrid than others, a point illustrated by the hybridisation spiral presented below.

Figure 11: Hybridisation Spiral: Degree of Linguistic Hybridisation



The first stage consists of alternation and insertion, followed by congruent lexicalisation, mixed jargon or interlanguage, and finally pidgin/creole or mixed language. Whereas alternations, insertions and congruent lexicalisation are spontaneous language-switching phenomena, in the case of mixed jargon, interlanguage, pidgin, creole and mixed language there is at least partial routinisation of mixed language use, and in the case of the latter three, the establishment and conventionalisation of grammatical rules.

The relationship between the respective communicative strategies and membership in the corresponding zone is shown in Table no. 1. The respective communicative strategies have been assigned to the corresponding zones of linguistic border integration. It should

be noted that language choice is singled out as an additional category within communicative strategies. It is also important to add that many of the strategies can be used in parallel within a conversation, which is intended to strengthen their function.

Table 1: Communicative Strategies in Relation to the Zones of Linguistic Border Integration

		Communication Strategies				
		Language choice: mother tongue (MT), partner language (PL), additional language (AL)	Avoidance (Av)	Mime	Appeal for assistance (As)	Code-switching (CS)
Zones of Linguistic Border Integration	Separation	Deliberate use of one's mother tongue	Avoidance of conversation in the MT/PL/AL	-	-	-
	Interaction	PL/AL	-	MT/PL/AL accompanied by mime	Requests for assistance mostly in the MT or AL	-
	Hybridity: Linguistic Borderscape	-	-	-	-	-CS MT/ PL or PL/MT -CS MT/AL or PS/ AL -CS: MT/PL/AL

The classification of language choice depends on the use of a given interlingual communication strategy, which is often shaped by whether it is intentional or, for example, constrained by a lack of language proficiency. The deliberate choice of one’s mother tongue (MT) when addressing a foreign speaker who does not speak one’s language is classified as uncooperative behaviour and belongs to the zone of separation. In contrast, conversation in one’s mother tongue (MT) in which the speaker makes an effort to convey information (often accompanied by other strategies), as well as interaction in the partner language or an additional language, are understood as cooperative behaviour and assigned to the zone of interaction. In addition, language choice may be accompanied by strategies such as mime (non-verbal communication: facial expressions, gestures), appeal for assistance, paraphrasing, or a combination of several of these. The use of more than one language situates communication in the zone of linguistic borderscape. The concepts of hybridity (as an end state) and hybridisation (as a process) are employed to account for a wide range of phenomena emerging from shared participation in both languages. For the purposes of broadly assigning a phenomenon to the zone of linguistic borderscape, the specification of the degree of hybridity is deliberately set aside. When switching between languages occurs, a range of language constellations may be identified. The speaker may alternate between the mother tongue and the partner language (code-switching MT–PL), between the mother tongue or partner language and an additional language (MT–AL or

PL–AL), or across all three languages (MT–PL–AL). The degree of linguistic mixing may vary significantly, ranging from the insertion of isolated lexical items from one language into another (code-mixing: MT→PL, PL→MT, MT or PL→AL, AL→MT or PL) to the formation of a mixed language (MT/PL, MT/AL, PL/AL or MT/PL/AL).

It should be noted that the table presented above outlines possible communication strategies of one speaker. In order to further specify the interlingual communicative situation, it is necessary to identify the strategies employed by both interlocutors.

To sum up, a correct interpretation of the model and a proper understanding of the phenomena occurring in border regions as language contact areas require rejecting the assignment of speakers to specific zones based solely on linguistic competence. Of course, it must be acknowledged that communication strategies depend on knowledge of the neighbouring language; however, it is primarily the speaker's attitude that determines in which zone they are situated. A person who does not know the language, if they ask passers-by for help (appeal for assistance), will be classified as belonging to the zone of interaction. This assumption of assigning individual zones to interlingual strategies rather than solely to the respondent's linguistic competence reveals the analytical perspective of this model. In the linguistic borderscape zone, we may therefore find speakers with a high level of language proficiency as well as those who are linguistically non-competent, and it should be noted that in this study they constitute a clear majority of speakers in this zone.

Conclusion

The model of border integration, with particular emphasis on the zone of linguistic borderscape, facilitates the investigation of linguistic phenomena in border regions across the three interrelated domains of language policy, linguistic landscape, and language contact. A proper interpretation of the proposed model begins with understanding hybridisation as an umbrella concept encompassing a broad spectrum of phenomena that arise from, or lead to, the crossing of linguistic boundaries. Such boundaries may be stable, permeable, or hybrid in nature.

The discussion presented in this article also provides clear answers to the research questions formulated in the introduction. First, the study demonstrates that border regions foster innovative forms of language policy and planning that extend beyond conventional national frameworks, including bilingual educational models, cross-border CLIL initiatives, and institutional arrangements specifically enabled by border permeability. Second, the analysis has shown that the linguistic borderscape manifests itself in the linguistic landscape through hybrid signs, bilingual neologisms, and multilingual forms of public communication that symbolically and functionally transcend national language boundaries. Third, the findings indicate that language contact in border regions gives rise to a continuum of communicative practices, such as code-switching, mixed jargons, and other contact-induced varieties. Taken together, these three domains demonstrate that

the linguistic borderscape is not a collection of isolated phenomena but an integrated analytical construct reflecting the dynamic interaction between language, space, and social practice in border regions.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that hybrid language practices and policies emerge in response to the sociolinguistic conditions created by permeable borders. Hybridity across the three domains, linguistic landscape, policy, and language contact, is enabled by the continuous, sustained, and diffuse interaction between the two linguistic and cultural systems present in the region. If such contact is not merely superficial or episodic but constitutes an embedded and enduring condition of life in the borderland, hybridity ceases to be an anomaly to be explained away and instead becomes a constitutive feature of the region's communicative ecology.

In sum, this paper contributes to the theoretical and methodological discussion on multilingualism in border regions by proposing the 'linguistic borderscape' as a useful heuristic and empirical category. One of the principal contributions of the proposed model is its conceptual integration of three research fields – language policy, linguistic landscape and language contact – within a single analytical framework for investigating border-induced linguistic hybridity. Moreover, the model highlights the need to embrace the complexity and creativity inherent in hybrid linguistic realities. Although illustrated with examples from the Polish-German borderland, the proposed framework is intended to be transferable to other border regions and language constellations, thereby offering a comparative analytical perspective on linguistic hybridity beyond the present case. The findings are not only relevant to scholars of sociolinguistics and language policy but also to practitioners engaged in cross-border cooperation, education, and cultural mediation. Ultimately, the proposed model underscores the potential of borderlands as spaces where new forms of linguistic interaction emerge – spaces where language is not only a means of communication but also a site of negotiation, adaptation, and innovation.

Author Contribution Statement

The author declares that this manuscript constitutes an original scholarly work authored exclusively by the author. All conceptualisation, theoretical development, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions presented in the article are solely attributable to the author. Generative AI tools were used exclusively for language editing, proofreading, and stylistic refinement and did not contribute to the intellectual content, argumentation, data analysis, or scientific findings of the manuscript. The author assumes full responsibility for the integrity and originality of the work.

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Multilingualism in the Border Area

Language and Literary Competence in Schools
with Slovene as the Language of Instruction in Italy

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Abstract

Schools with Slovene as the language of instruction in Italy are both institutions of minority-language continuity and educational spaces for pupils with diverse language biographies. This article examines a complete corpus of 18 published interactive learning units designed to supplement regular school work in Slovene at primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary levels. The units address topics, communicative situations, text types and uses of Slovene that are not normally foregrounded in regular lessons. Primary- and lower-secondary curricula provide the baseline for interpreting this supplementary function, while three published studies supply contextual evidence on unequal exposure and use. The original contribution is a qualitative comparative content analysis of the final units, not of their development, implementation or effects. The analysis considers learner activity, linguistic and textual focus, literary engagement, communicative purpose and domain, interaction and modality, and the organisation of task sequences. Eight recurrent task families were identified. Across educational levels, activities move from recognition, matching and guided completion towards situated interaction, explanation, reformulation, interpretation, evaluation and the production of complete texts for specified purposes and audiences. The units extend school-based Slovene into service encounters, health, travel, technology, public information, language variation, reading and literary response. They therefore supplement the curricular development of language and literary competence by filling gaps in thematic and communicative coverage. The study does not establish effectiveness, but it shows how supplementary materials can represent broader textual, practical, public and interpretative participation through a protected minority language.

Keywords: Slovene in Italy; Minority-Language Education; Slovene-Medium Schools; Language Support; Language Competence; Literary Competence; Interactive Learning Units; Functional Literacy; Border Region

Introduction

Schools with Slovene as the language of instruction in Italy emerged and developed as central institutions of the Slovene national community. Their historical role is closely connected with language maintenance, cultural memory and community continuity, while their present role must be understood against changing demographic, social and linguistic conditions (Bogatec, 2015, p. 5–21; Grgič & Guardiancich, 2025; Jagodic, 2024, p. 31–55). These schools form an integral part of the Italian state-school system. They follow national programmes with the adaptations and additions required by the Slovene-medium setting, and locally prepared or adapted materials are needed because resources produced for the majority system or imported from Slovenia do not automatically address the linguistic profile of pupils in Italy (Bogatec, 2020, p. 17–21).

Enrolment in a Slovene-medium school no longer necessarily means that Slovene is a pupil's first, primary or strongest language of family socialisation. For some pupils, Slovene remains concentrated mainly in school and other formal settings; others use it across family, peer, leisure and public domains. The central difference is not simply whether pupils know Slovene, but how widely they can mobilise it across situations, interlocutors, genres and registers (Grgič, 2016, p. 87–102; Grgič, 2024, p. 223–228; Melinc Mlekuž, 2019, p. 67–82).

The article addresses three research questions: (1) Which task types recur in the complete corpus of interactive learning units, and how do their dominant forms differ across primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary education? (2) Which dimensions of language and literary competence are activated by the tasks, and how are they connected within individual task sequences? (3) How do the units supplement regular school work by extending the topics, communicative situations, text types and uses of Slovene available to pupils? Previous research on the EDUKA2 cross-border classroom model examined teachers' reflections on cross-border collaboration and on the usefulness of approaches such as CLIL, experiential learning, authentic learning environments and learner participation (Baloh & Bratož, 2019). To the best of the author's knowledge, the complete corpus has not previously been examined systematically at the level of task sequences.

Language and literary competence are treated as analytically distinguishable but interdependent. Language competence comprises the lexical, grammatical, textual, pragmatic and stylistic resources required to understand and produce texts in different situations. The primary-school curriculum describes these resources through components of communicative competence, including naming, syntax, pronunciation, spelling, style and metalinguistic awareness (Slovene Research Institute, 2021, p. 4–6). Vogel further emphasises intra-linguistic diversity, register, context and language-cultural awareness: competent use entails understanding not only whether a form is correct, but also what it does, whom it addresses and which social meanings it carries (Vogel, 2014, p. 3–16; Vogel, 2019, p. 1–17).

Literary competence refers to the capacity to experience, understand, analyse, interpret, evaluate and creatively respond to literary texts. Zajc (2019, p. 57–65) connects it with literary conventions and knowledge, emotional and experiential response, critical

reception, creation and recreation, and recognition of the aesthetic, ethical, cognitive and fictional effects of literature. It presupposes general communicative competence while also extending it through multi-layered reading and the verbalisation of a reading experience. Integrated competence is used here as an analytical construct for the reciprocal relationship among language resources, communicative use, textual and functional literacy, literary reception and interpretation, and cultural reflection. It does not denote an instructional programme or an implementation model. The central claim is that knowledge of Slovene in a border minority school becomes educationally consequential when pupils can act through the language, not merely reproduce linguistic forms or literary information.

Slovene in Italy Between Institutional Status, Curriculum and Unequal Use

In minority-language education, the distinction between status and use is decisive. Formal protection, institutional support and a school network are necessary conditions for language continuity, but they do not themselves generate regular use or a differentiated repertoire (Cooper, 1989; Fishman, 1991). Slovene is institutionally present in schools, media, cultural organisations and legal-protection mechanisms in Italy, yet its availability varies across everyday, public, peer-group, digital and supra-local domains. The analytical question is therefore not only whether Slovene is protected, but whether speakers encounter sufficient reasons, opportunities and resources to use it across domains.

Categories such as mother tongue, first language, language of the environment and native speaker are not neutral descriptions. Grgič (2016, p. 87–102) shows that they may acquire ideological meanings when transferred from specialist contexts into educational and public discourse. The present article therefore does not classify pupils through fixed native/non-native categories. It refers to Slovene primarily as the language of instruction and as a minority language whose acquisition and use depend on pupils' different language biographies and opportunities for contact.

A school with a minority language as the language of instruction does not automatically provide sustained access to the full range of everyday, informal and pragmatically varied uses of that language. Formal schooling is indispensable, but it cannot by itself ensure a broad repertoire (Cummins, 1989; Hickey, 2001, p. 443–474). When Slovene is encountered mainly in lessons, formal texts and ritualised community settings, pupils may acquire school-based and codified varieties without comparable confidence in peer-group, colloquial and supra-local interaction. Grgič (2024, p. 223–228) describes this imbalance as inverse diglossia: some speakers are more secure in formal standard use connected with school than in a wider range of everyday genres, styles and interlocutors.

This perspective is complemented by research on literacy and functional language use. New Literacy Studies understands literacy not only as an individual skill but as a set of situated social practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7–15; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; 2003). Mezgec (2011, p. 71–78) shows that pupils in Slovene-medium schools may

develop school and academic literacy in Slovene while experiencing greater difficulty with pragmatically oriented texts connected with public participation. Functional literacy therefore concerns the ability to use Slovene in requests, explanations, notices, instructions, applications, arguments and other socially consequential texts, not merely the ability to complete school exercises.

The curricular baseline is broad. The primary-school curriculum defines the central aim of Slovene as the development of communicative competence through listening, reading, speaking and writing and through engagement with non-literary and literary texts. It also includes critical reception, text production, language and metalinguistic awareness, and elementary literary knowledge (Slovene Research Institute, 2021, p. 4–6). The lower-secondary curriculum similarly foregrounds active communicative competence, practical and creative command of the four communicative activities, and literary experience, imagination, evaluation and cognition (Slovene Research Institute, 2019, p. 4–5). The units do not reproduce this curriculum. They supplement it by extending school work into topics, communicative situations, genres and domains of Slovene use that are not normally foregrounded in regular lessons.

Research Design, Corpus and Analytical Procedure

The evidence base has two parts: contextual evidence from published empirical research and an original qualitative comparative content analysis of educational documents (Bowen, 2009; Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). The contextual studies were selected because they document complementary features of the language ecology relevant to the corpus: the distribution of Slovene across domains, different family and school language trajectories, and reliance on school and peers as sources of exposure. Their participant data are neither reanalysed nor pooled. All original findings reported here derive from the final learning-unit corpus.

The primary corpus was fixed before coding through three closed institutional publication sets issued in 2019, 2021 and 2025. Inclusion required a final published interactive unit intended for primary, lower-secondary or upper-secondary pupils and explicitly designed to supplement regular Slovene school work. A preschool-only unit was excluded because the comparison begins with primary education. The resulting corpus contains 18 learning units; one unit was issued in two files. Neutral codes U01–U18 are used in Appendix A and throughout the findings. Titles, authorship and production history are recorded for source transparency but are not analytical categories.

Table 1. *Empirical components, functions and analytical boundaries*

Evidence component	Role in the present study	Boundary of interpretation	Source status
Published communicative-competence study (420 students; 43 teachers)	Contextualises the difference between school knowledge, actual use and a broader communicative repertoire.	Participant data are not reanalysed.	Context only
Published interview studies (15 professionals; parent study used for context)	Contextualises language trajectories, peer use, spontaneous formulation and motives for enrolment.	No new interview analysis; datasets are not pooled.	Context only
Published COVID-19 studies (455 staff, 878 parents, 283 students, 11 headteachers)	Shows reliance on school and peers as sources of exposure to Slovene.	No response-level reuse or causal inference.	Context only
Eighteen interactive learning units	Primary corpus for task families, domains, interaction, sequence structure and language-literature relations.	No analysis of production, classroom use, learner response or effect.	Original evidence
Primary- and lower-secondary draft curricula	Define the regular curricular baseline against which the units' supplementary function is interpreted.	No evaluation of curriculum implementation.	Context only

Source: Analytical framework developed for the present study. Published research provides context; the learning-unit corpus provides the original documentary findings.

The learning unit is the primary unit of comparison across educational levels. Within each unit, individual directives and coherent groups of linked directives were read together with the stimulus and activity frame needed to establish what the learner was expected to do. This approach was necessary because the sources differ substantially in internal organisation. Some use a main task followed by lettered steps, some divide one activity into numerous numbered prompts, and others present page-based sequences without continuous numbering. Counting every blank or sub-question as an equivalent item would create false precision and obscure the organisation of the activity sequence.

Coding proceeded in two full readings. The first mapped each source by educational level, topic, mode of activity and internal progression. The second coded the task evidence across six axes: (1) required learner activity; (2) linguistic and textual focus; (3) literary activity; (4) communicative purpose and domain; (5) interaction and modality; and (6) sequence structure. Multiple coding was permitted because one sequence may combine

comprehension, lexical or grammatical work, interaction, textual transformation and literary response. A category was assigned only when it was explicitly required by the instruction or unambiguously necessary for completion. A narrative stimulus was not coded as literary solely because it told a story; literary coding required an explicitly literary text or a response concerning character, setting, perspective, imagery, interpretation, evaluation or creative transformation.

Table 2. Coding framework

Analytical axis	Categories	Operational question
Required learner activity	Recognise/select; match/classify/complete; retrieve/reformulate; transform/correct; compare/explain; interact/simulate; interpret/evaluate; produce/create	What observable activity does the instruction require?
Linguistic and textual focus	Lexis and semantic relations; morphology and syntax; orthography; cohesion; register and pragmatics; genre; summary and reorganisation; purposeful production	Which linguistic or textual resources must be mobilised?
Literary activity	Event; character and relations; motive and theme; narrator and perspective; imagery and style; context; interpretation; personal response; comparison, evaluation and creative transformation	What form of literary engagement is explicitly required?
Communicative purpose and domain	Request, inform, explain, advise, persuade, evaluate; personal, service, public, media/digital and literary/cultural domains	For what purpose and in which domain is Slovene used?
Interaction and modality	Individual, pair/group, role-based; print, image, audio/video, multimodal; transformative	How is activity organised across people, texts and modes?
Sequence structure	Orientation; comprehension; focused language/text work; situated use; reflection; new product	How are linked activities organised within the unit?

The purpose of the analysis is to identify qualitative task families and recurrent sequence patterns, not to rank individual prompts by frequency. A brief matching exercise and a multi-page reading project are not quantitatively equivalent. Auditability is supported by the explicit coding framework, the complete source inventory, neutral source codes and a retained source-by-category verification matrix. Because the author served as an editor on several source publications, the corpus was fixed before interpretation, all eligible units

were included, coding was limited to observable task requirements and every source was read twice. Independent recoding would further strengthen reliability and is acknowledged as a limitation.

The study is confined to the final published units. Their production histories, participating professionals, institutional collaboration, classroom implementation, learner responses and learning effects are outside its scope. The article neither reconstructs how the units were created nor attributes their characteristics to a developmental process. It analyses the activities, linguistic and textual focus, literary engagement, communicative purposes and domains, forms of interaction, modalities and sequence structures represented in the documents.

Figure 1. Analytical model of integrated competence in a multilingual border school

CONTEXT: institutional status • language biographies • sustained exposure • meaningful opportunities for use				
Language resources	Communicative use	Textual and functional literacy	Literary reception and interpretation	Cultural and intercultural reflection
INTEGRATED COMPETENCE IN TASK SEQUENCES Broader textual, practical, public and literary participation through Slovene				

Note. The model is relational, not sequential. The dimensions are analysed separately but become integrated when a task sequence coordinates them in use. Source: Analytical model developed for the present study.

Contextual Evidence: Unequal Language Trajectories

The first contextual study examined communicative competence among 420 students and 43 teachers in Italy and Slovenia (Melinc Mlekuž, 2019, p. 67–82). Its relevance here lies in the distinction between school-based knowledge, self-reported command and flexible use across domains. Italian and mixed practices were frequent in peer interaction, organised sport, reading and digital communication. These findings do not demonstrate an absence of Slovene competence; they show that the domains and textual practices available in the two languages are not equally distributed.

The second contextual study was a qualitative investigation based on 15 semi-structured interviews with education professionals conducted in 2020 (Melinc Mlekuž, 2022, p. 109–127). A separate study within the same project included 183 parent questionnaires and 17 in-depth parent interviews (Tenca Montini & Zago, 2022, p. 57–86). The professional and parent datasets remain methodologically distinct. Together they show that families may choose a Slovene-medium school for multilingualism, educational quality, future mobility or local opportunity without Slovene necessarily being the principal family language. Interviewees also distinguished reproduction of learnt material from the more demanding ability to formulate questions, explanations and responses in new situations.

The third contextual study examined education in Slovene during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between May and June 2020, responses were collected from 455 educational staff, 878 parents, 283 students and 11 headteachers, and quantitative evidence was complemented by interviews (Brezigar, 2020, p. 89–91; Melinc Mlekuž, 2023, p. 199–218). The interruption of physical schooling made the distribution of language exposure unusually visible. The study does not provide an individual causal estimate of language loss, but it documents how strongly access to Slovene depended on school and peer interaction for some pupils.

Taken together, the contextual studies describe unequal and changing language trajectories rather than two fixed groups of speakers. Pupils who encounter Slovene chiefly in education may retain it mainly within formal domains or gradually extend it into peer, leisure and public interaction. The documentary analysis does not classify individual pupils or infer their proficiency. It asks how the final task corpus represents uses of Slovene that may be less available in family, peer, leisure, service and public settings.

Interactive Learning Units as Targeted Language Support

The corpus contains eight recurrent task families. The categories overlap because a sequence may begin with recognition or comprehension, isolate a linguistic or textual feature, and then move towards explanation, interaction, interpretation or the production of a complete text. The task family assigned to a sequence identifies its main analytical function rather than every activity it contains.

Table 3. Recurrent task families in the complete corpus

Task family	Representative activities	Main analytical focus	Typical organisation
Recognition and selection	Identify, mark, choose, distinguish, decide whether information is stated	Focused comprehension and recognition	Usually individual
Matching, classification and completion	Connect, group, insert forms, complete a table or text	Lexis, grammar, semantic relations and cohesion	Guided written or visual activity
Retrieval and reformulation	Locate information, answer, take notes, retell, summarise	Information selection and coherent restatement	Oral or written
Transformation and correction	Rewrite, replace, correct, change form, tense, case or register	Control of form and adaptation to audience	Text transformation
Comparison and explanation	Compare variants or languages, infer, explain, justify	Metalinguistic reasoning and strategic use of resources	Oral or written explanation

Task family	Representative activities	Main analytical focus	Typical organisation
Interaction and simulation	Discuss, interview, telephone, negotiate, role-play, report another view	Pragmatic use, turn-taking and audience awareness	Pair or group
Literary reception and interpretation	Retell, analyse perspective or imagery, evaluate, recommend	Literary understanding, response and judgement	Oral, written or creative
Purposeful and creative production	Message, invitation, advice, narrative, leaflet, advertisement, creative continuation	Complete texts for a specified purpose and audience	Written, oral or multimodal

From Recognition to Situated Action

Recognition, matching and completion are prominent throughout the corpus, but they rarely form the only endpoint of a longer sequence. Images, maps, timetables, dialogues, public-information texts, video clips, poems and stories introduce entry points. Initial activities establish vocabulary and comprehension; subsequent steps require learners to use the same material for a decision, explanation, conversation or new product. Sequences therefore commonly move from access to a text, through focused analysis, towards situated use or a new product, although shorter primary-level sequences may stop after one or two stages.

At primary level, sound–letter work, missing-letter activities, copying, picture–word matching and sentence completion support emergent literacy. These activities are embedded in recognisable semantic fields such as institutions, occupations, seasons, clothing, animals, food, transport, safety and leisure. In one service-oriented unit, pupils read opening hours and contact details, decide which institution is appropriate in a practical situation, and complete or enact a short exchange (U08). In a road-safety unit, poems, short informational texts, route-related language and creative tasks place reading and writing within a familiar public domain (U17). A word is therefore connected not only with a definition or picture, but with an action and an interlocutor.

The same pattern is visible in work on form. Inflection, prepositions, verb forms, sentence order and orthography are connected with routes, food, household activities, health, plans and short narratives. Pupils may first complete a constrained form, then use it in a sentence, and finally incorporate it into a diary entry, procedure, description or spoken exchange (U11, U16). Linguistic form is made observable through use rather than presented only as an isolated rule.

Everyday, Practical and Public Communication

Everyday and service-related content forms one of the strongest corpus-wide patterns. The units represent libraries, post offices, pharmacies, healthcare, shops, transport, travel, money, household problems, leisure and public information. Learners locate details, select an appropriate institution, formulate a request, make an appointment, describe symptoms, ask for clarification, give directions, report a problem or prepare a short message. These activities correspond to the gap identified by research on functional literacy: a pupil may know the standard language used in school while having fewer opportunities to practise pragmatically consequential genres in Slovene.

At lower-secondary level, practical sequences become linguistically and socially more complex. Health-related work may combine viewing or reading, comprehension, vocabulary, phraseology, form in context, discussion and a simulated encounter with health personnel (U09). Learners must adapt politeness, ask follow-up questions, explain symptoms and use institutional vocabulary. Other units require interviews, reporting a partner's view, interpreting public information or selecting language according to the addressee (U01, U02, U05). Practical communication is therefore not reduced to a memorised dialogue. It requires the coordination of linguistic resources, turn-taking, contextual judgement and the ability to repair or extend an exchange.

Upper-secondary units extend practical participation towards public and ethically charged issues. Learners interpret texts on wellbeing, technology, environmental responsibility and media language; compare formulations; discuss possible responses; and write advice, campaign texts, leaflets, notices or reasoned positions (U04, U05, U12). The everyday orientation of the corpus does not imply lower intellectual expectations. Concrete situations provide an identifiable purpose for developed explanation, evaluation and argument.

Language Variation and Discursive Flexibility

Several sequences place local, colloquial, standard, Italian-influenced and supra-local Slovene forms in relation to one another. Learners identify contact-induced wording, compare alternatives, consult reference resources, correct forms or reformulate a message for a different audience (U03, U04, U10, U13). The requirement is not uniformity in every situation. It is an expanded capacity to choose a form in relation to purpose, interlocutor and wider comprehensibility (Vogel, 2014, p. 3–16; Vogel, 2019, p. 1–17). Existing repertoires become points of departure for comparison rather than evidence of deficiency.

Language awareness becomes more explicit at higher levels. Learners classify forms, explain case or aspect distinctions, compare semantic relations, analyse collocations and justify corrections (U11, U12, U13). Explanation after selection is important: the task is not only to produce the expected form, but to articulate why it is appropriate and how a different choice would alter meaning, register or audience effect.

Literary Activity Across Educational Levels

Literary activity is present across the corpus but is not distributed uniformly. At primary level, poems and stories support listening, reading, vocabulary, rhythm, retelling, character recognition, sequence, setting, inference and creative extension (U07, U17). An extended reading journal provides the clearest bridge towards fuller literary participation: pupils record bibliographic information, identify main and secondary characters, establish place and time, prepare a summary, formulate an opinion and decide whether they would recommend the book (U18). Literary competence is therefore represented not only as recognition of textual elements, but as the organisation and communication of a reading experience for another reader.

At upper-secondary level, literary and culturally situated texts are concentrated in selected sequences rather than spread evenly across all units. Learners interpret perspective, figurative language, stylistic effects and relations between a literary text and another cultural product (U04, U13). These sequences require both literary reading and the language needed to make interpretation explicit. Their concentration is itself an analytical finding: practical communication and language variation provide the most continuous corpus-wide thread, while extended literary interpretation appears in strategically placed sequences.

Cross-Level Progression and Integrated Competence

Across the three levels, progression is visible in four related movements. The first is from naming towards relational and context-sensitive vocabulary. Primary pupils identify and group words; lower-secondary learners use them in situations and semantic networks; upper-secondary learners explain collocations, variation and conceptual distinctions. The second movement is from closely guided activity towards less explicitly guided, purpose-driven language use. Models, pictures and completion frames gradually give way to messages, advice, explanations, arguments and multimodal public texts. The third movement is from familiar context towards wider social consequence. The fourth is from personal literary response towards interpretation supported by textual evidence.

Table 4. Dominant progression across educational levels

Analytical dimension	Primary	Lower-secondary	Upper-secondary
Language resources	Naming, sound-letter relations, sentence formation and inflection in familiar contexts	Lexical networks, register, form in use, correction and reference resources	Metalinguistic explanation, collocation, aspect, contact-influenced patterns and stylistic choice
Interaction	Guided pair talk, collective sentence building and simple practical exchanges	Service simulations, interviews, follow-up questions and reporting another person's view	Advice, negotiation, public presentation and sustained discussion of complex issues

Analytical dimension	Primary	Lower-secondary	Upper-secondary
Textual and functional literacy	Opening hours, lists, routes, postcards, short narratives and procedures	Messages, invitations, appointments, descriptions and information texts	Arguments, campaign materials, public notices, leaflets and extended advice texts
Literary competence	Listening, retelling, character and setting, personal response and creative continuation	Summary, recommendation, comparison and increasingly elaborated response	Interpretation of perspective and style, cultural comparison and justified judgement
Dominant sequence pattern	Modelled and closely guided activity	Linked guidance, interaction and explanation in new situations	Longer explanation, evaluation and purpose-driven text production

These movements support integrated competence as an analytical construct. Language resources, interaction, textual literacy and literary interpretation are not merely adjacent categories. They become reciprocally connected within task sequences. A pupil needs vocabulary and syntax to summarise a story; the summary provides the basis for evaluation; evaluation requires a coherent text addressed to another reader. A learner who reformulates an informal environmental invitation for public circulation must recognise register, select language forms, understand genre and anticipate an audience. Competence becomes visible as coordinated action.

Discussion

Supplementary Language Support for School Work

The corpus supplements rather than replaces regular instruction. Its distinctive contribution lies in broadening the thematic and communicative range of school-based Slovene. The units neither establish a separate curriculum nor repeat the ordinary subject sequence. They create additional contexts in which pupils can mobilise language and literary competence in topics, genres and situations that are not normally foregrounded in regular lessons and may also be unevenly available outside school.

Simulated Domains of Use

Everyday-life content has a structural function. It creates simulated domains in which Slovene is required for an action: locating a service, telephoning, describing symptoms, asking for information, following a route, planning a journey, advising a peer, interpreting a notice or preparing a public text. For pupils who use Italian in many peer, leisure and service settings, these scenarios provide structured opportunities to mobilise school-developed Slovene in additional domains. The challenge is not merely the quantity of Slovene, but the diversity of functions for which it is used.

Language and Literature Within One Participation Framework

The units also clarify the relationship between language and literary competence. Literary activity is not an ornamental addition to practical communication. Retelling requires selection and cohesion; interpreting a character requires precise naming and evidence; explaining figurative language requires semantic flexibility; recommending a book requires evaluation and audience awareness. Conversely, practical tasks frequently contain interpretative work: learners infer which service is needed, identify intention, judge appropriateness, explain an idiom or evaluate advice. Both domains depend on constructing meaning in relation to context and expressing that meaning through Slovene.

Interactivity in Practice

The units combine four observable forms of interactivity. Social interactivity involves pair work, interviews, role-based exchanges and reporting another person's view. Textual interactivity requires learners to select, reorganise, correct or reformulate information. Multimodal interactivity connects print, image, audio, video and public information. Transformative interactivity requires a new product for a changed purpose or addressee. This distinction clarifies how the corpus supplements school work without turning documentary description into a claim about a general instructional model.

Analytical Boundaries

The documents cannot show whether the activities are enacted as intended, whether learners complete them successfully or whether participation transfers to spontaneous communication. They can show that the published corpus represents domains of use that sociolinguistic research identifies as unevenly available. The contribution is therefore descriptive and analytical: it connects sociolinguistic need, curricular baseline and task structure without claiming causal effect.

Relevance to European Border Education

The case is relevant beyond the Slovene–Italian border. Minority-language schools may combine strong institutional recognition with uneven social availability of the language. Comparing regular curricula with supplementary task corpora can reveal which domains, genres, interlocutors and forms of text production are represented and which remain absent. Three principles are potentially transferable: language functions can be diversified beyond school-internal questioning; progression can be traced through movement from recognition to reformulation, interaction and justified interpretation; and local repertoires can become objects of reflection without being treated as deficits or replacing the need for wider comprehensibility. What is transferable is the analytical procedure, not the direct adoption of the units or an assumption that they would have the same effects elsewhere.

Limitations

The study has five principal limitations. First, it analyses published task structures, not classroom enactment, learner responses or language development. Second, the sources vary in length and internal organisation, so the analysis does not construct a frequency hierarchy of individual prompts. Third, educational-level categories overlap in several sources; the comparison therefore identifies dominant patterns rather than a controlled longitudinal sequence. Fourth, multimodal links may change over time; the study records the mode required by the published instruction but does not evaluate the continuing availability or quality of every external resource. Fifth, coding was conducted by one researcher who had an editorial role in several sources. Complete corpus inclusion, neutral codes, conservative coding, two full readings and a retained verification matrix improve auditability, but independent recoding remains desirable.

Scope of the Contribution

The contribution is confined to the final published units and their observable task structures. The study does not reconstruct their development or implementation, and it makes no claims about learner outcomes or causal effects. Its original contribution is the systematic comparison of how supplementary units extend the thematic, communicative, textual and literary range of school-based Slovene across educational levels.

Conclusion

Schools with Slovene as the language of instruction in Italy cannot be understood solely as institutions of language maintenance, although that function remains indispensable. They are also educational spaces in which pupils with different family languages and language trajectories may become users of Slovene across textual, practical, public and literary domains. The contextual studies show why this expansion matters: school may be the principal site of sustained Slovene exposure for some pupils, while peer, leisure, media and service interactions often take place in Italian or mixed repertoires.

The article's original empirical contribution is a systematic qualitative comparison of all 18 interactive learning units included under the stated criteria. Across the corpus, activities move from recognition, matching and guided completion towards situated interaction, explanation, reformulation, interpretation, evaluation and the production of complete texts for specified purposes. The units supplement the language and literary competence developed in regular instruction by filling gaps in thematic and communicative coverage. Everyday and practical contexts are prominent because opportunities to use Slovene in these domains are not equally distributed beyond school; literary activities connect reading with summary, response, interpretation and recommendation; and language-variation tasks develop awareness of audience, register and wider comprehensibility.

The findings support integrated competence as a relational analytical construct. Language resources, communicative use, textual and functional literacy, literary reception and interpretation, and cultural reflection become connected within task sequences. Institutional protection remains a necessary foundation, but its educational consequence also depends on the range of activities pupils can undertake through the language. The analysed units represent one form of targeted language support for school work. Future studies using classroom observation and learner work could examine how the sequences are enacted and how pupils respond to them; those questions lie outside the present document analysis.

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Ethics Statement

Not applicable. The original empirical corpus consists of publicly available educational documents. Previously published studies are cited only as contextual evidence, and no participant-level data are reanalysed.

Declaration of Interest

The author declares no financial conflict of interest. Her previous editorial involvement in several source publications is disclosed in the Method section.

Data Availability

The primary documents are publicly available final learning units. Appendix A lists every included source and its educational level. Stable repository links are provided in the references where available; the remaining units are catalogued by the publisher and in national bibliographic records. The coding framework is reproduced in Table 2, and the working source-by-category verification matrix can be made available for scholarly checking within copyright restrictions on source reproduction.

Appendix

Appendix A. Corpus Inventory and Analytical Boundaries

Appendix Table A1 lists all 18 school-age units included under the prespecified criteria. Source codes keep the findings centred on task structures rather than publication titles or authorship. One unit issued in two parts is treated as a single analytical source.

Appendix Table A1. Source codes and corpus characteristics

Code	Bibliographic source	Educational level	Dominant supplementary focus
U01	Jagodic, 2019, Radi potujemo	Lower/upper-secondary	Travel, dialogue, interview, reformulation, advertisement, narrative and literary extension
U02	Liberšar, 2019, Denar in dom	Lower/upper-secondary	Money, household vocabulary, phraseology, comparison of forms and interview
U03	Žigon, 2019a, 2019b, Zmigaj se!, parts 1–2	Lower/upper-secondary	Sport, peer interaction, regional comprehensibility, narrative and environmental argument
U04	Biber, 2019, Videoigrice in tehnologija	Lower/upper-secondary	Technology, digital language, comparison of forms, text transformation and literary comparison
U05	Vaupotič, 2019, Varstvo okolja, naložba v prihodnost	Lower/upper-secondary	Environmental vocabulary, invitation, message, public information and leaflet
U06	Gherlani, 2021, V družbi besed	Primary	Vocabulary fields, word and sentence reading, short writing and visual activity
U07	Grgič, D., 2021, Besede s knjižne police	Primary	Literary listening and reading, retelling, character, setting and language form
U08	Marko, 2021a, Besede v vsakdanji rabi 1	Primary	Services, opening hours, occupations, practical situations and simulation
U09	Marko, 2021b, Besede v vsakdanji rabi 2	Lower-secondary	Health, lifestyle, service encounters, phraseology and form in context
U10	Poredoš, 2021, Slovenščina in njene bližnje in daljne sosesde	Lower-secondary	Language diversity, multilingual biographies, comparison and research
U11	Marko, 2021d, Slovnica je mala malica	Lower-secondary	Morphology and syntax embedded in varied contextual activities

Code	Bibliographic source	Educational level	Dominant supplementary focus
U12	Marko, 2021c, Besede v vsakdanji rabi 3	Upper-secondary	Wellbeing, critical reading, collocation, aspect, correction and advice text
U13	Devetak, 2021, Meje mojega planeta niso meje mojega jezika	Upper-secondary	Paronyms, language contact, non-literary and literary interpretation
U14	Višček, 2025, Berem in pišem	Primary	Emergent reading and writing with varied levels of guidance
U15	Gherlani, 2025, V družbi besed 2	Primary	Vocabulary expansion, reading, short text production and seasonal themes
U16	Umer, 2025, Oblikujemo besede	Primary	Inflection in context, routes, food, procedures, diary and picture-supported writing
U17	Dobriča, 2025, Po cesti besed	Primary	Road safety, poems, stories, games, drawing and creative production
U18	Širec Rovis, 2025, Bralni dnevnik	Primary/lower-secondary	Extended reading, bibliographic data, summary, opinion and recommendation

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History, Archaeology and Cultural Heritage of Interconnections and Complicities in Intra-European Borders

The Case of the Navigable Section of the Guadiana River (Portugal – Spain)

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Abstract

This paper examines the current state of the navigable section of the Guadiana River (that marks a part of the interstate border) from the perspective of cultural heritage and tourism. Focusing mainly on the archaeological and historical record, it aims at providing some directions for the enhancement of local memories and identities around the role of the river in the past interactions, interconnections, and entanglements. Following a Global history-centred approach, this paper values the importance of the archaeology of ports such as Mértola (located ca. 70km from the coast) for the construction of a narrative centred on entanglements that explains, from a historical long-term perspective, the construction of this unique cultural landscape. This narrative is crucial for the enhancement of border heritage beyond the idea of interstate separation.

Keywords: Border Heritage, Border landscape, Guadiana River, Portuguese-Spanish Borderlands

Introduction

“Mi pueblo se llama Villanueva, pero debería llamarse Villamuerta porque es una villa muerta. He oído que en tiempos pasados tuvo épocas de auge, pero hoy está en franca decadencia. La gente joven se ha ido marchando y el pueblo se ha quedado casi vacío.”

J.M. Vaz de Soto, Quoted in Pintado & Barrenechea, 1972¹

1 “My village is called Villanueva [New Village], but it should be called Villamuerta [Dead Village] because it is a dead village. I have heard that in the past there was a golden age, but now it is openly declining. Young people have been leaving, and the village has been left almost abandoned” (translated by the author).

This passage from José María Vaz de Soto's *El infierno y la brisa* (The hell and the breeze, 1970), quoted by A. Pintado and E. Barrenechea (1972), describes eloquently the reality of several communities that are located near or on the border between Portugal and Spain: abandonment, demographic decline, peripheralisation and ageing. Pintado and Barrenechea's book had the particularity of calling the attention of Iberian scholars to these territories by the end of that decade and in the first half of the 1980's, after several years of oblivion (Cabo, 1981; García, 1997; López Trigal, 1984; see Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2019, p. 135ff.). This situation is a turning point in the examination of the Iberian borderlands and its integration in a set of studies previously developed in other European borders (see, e.g., Guichonnet & Raffestin, 1974), where there were also cooperation programmes, especially after the founding of the Association of European Border Regions in 1971 (<https://www.aebr.eu/history/>).

It should be noted that the Iberian countries were about to join the EEC in the 1980's, which finally happened in 1986. Few years before, in the first year following the fall of dictatorships in Portugal (1974) and Spain (1975), the Iberian Scholars, especially the geographers, started taking a closer look to the situation of borderlands, which was notorious both in the 3rd Conference of Iberian Geography in Barcelona (1983) and in the Meeting of Ajuda in Olivenza (1985), in which there were several important contributions to the examination of borders from the perspective of political and regional geography (among many others, Lois & Carballo, 2015; López Trigal, 1984;) and focusing on the impact of political delimitations on landscapes, on economy, and on the lives of local communities. In sum, the examination of the function of these "lines" progressively gave way to a perception focused on borders as "social, cultural and political constructions", as well as on historical processes that take place in these territories and leaves marks in the landscape (Liberato et al. 2018, p. 1349; see also Newman & Paasi, 1998), which can also be examined from an archaeological and historical perspectives (Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2025).

The integration of the Iberian countries in the EEC in 1986 paved the way to the implementation of several programmes of regional development focused on the fixation of population in border areas, as well as on transport connections/ spatial development and exploitation of resources (e.g., Cavaco, 1995; Gaspar, 1987)². The Council Regulation 2052/88 of 24th June 1988, about the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is a conspicuous example of these concerns and priorities for "ensuring the development and structural adjustment of regions whose development is lagging behind", such as border regions, in the process of integration (Council Regulation 2052/88, 24th June 1988). Some months later, the 5th Luso-Spanish Summit of 1988 laid the foundations of the first cross-border initiatives between the two countries, and it was followed by the first INTERREG programme (1990-1993), which was created to empower regional entities affected by the new geopolitical and economic circumstances with structural fundings (among others,

2 The investment in transportation is unequal if one compares the construction of road webs that connect big cities with the connections between urban nuclei of the interior.

García Fernández, Del Espino & Albuquerque, 2017; Prokkola, 2023; Lois & Cairo, 2015, p. 322). As F. Durand points out, the first two programmes called the attention to the enhancement of border heritage “through economic activities”, as well as to the improvement of cross-border cultural identity in the subsequent initiatives. In the last decades, the EU has directly or indirectly supported projects of local practitioners and research (Durand, 2022, p. 309-310; see *infra*).

Moreover, in 1991, Portugal and Spain also signed the Schengen Agreement, which was a turning point in the relationship between these countries and in the life of borderlanders. Notwithstanding, the abolition of border controls between the Iberian countries paradoxically aggravated the issues of these liminal territories long affected by isolation and peripheralisation. These borders lost their relevance and, consequently, both smuggling and surveillance became obsolete activities (see Prokkola, 2023), but on the other hand it put an end to the long-lasting queues to cross the border by ferry between Ayamonte and Vila Real de Santo António (cf. Albuquerque & Monteiro, 2025, fig. 1; Pintado & Barrenechea, 1972, p. 33). Intra-European dyads became laboratories of integration, especially after the creation of the so-called Euroregions (Lois & Cairo, 2015, p. 322). Furthermore, integration is strengthened by the work of institutions and initiatives such as TEIN (Transfrontier Euro-Institute Network) and B-Solutions, which collaborate with universities in practitioners to overcome several issues related to dyads, especially in terms of governance.

The aim of this paper is to examine the navigable section of the Lower Guadiana River as a dynamic borderscape shaped by long-term interactions and cultural entanglements, using an interdisciplinary approach. This perspective enables the reconstruction of everyday practices, cross-border interactions, and local responses to regional or national processes. It contrasts container-based narratives (often portraying borders as rigid barriers) with the lived experiences of borderland communities from a bottom-up perspective. A diachronic analysis allows the study of this landscape before and after the political delimitation of the 13th century, which means that it is mandatory to integrate several sources of information. A broad and interdisciplinary analysis is then crucial for the creation of an open-air museum, where different kinds of heritage are integrated (see Albuquerque, 2023). The approach presented in this paper is focused first and foremost on the history and archaeology of the navigable section of the Lower Guadiana Basin, considering that a long-term examination could positively contribute to the heritagisation of these “in-between” cultural landscapes.

Figure 1: The Lower Guadiana border area (adapted from mapsforfree.com)



Heritagisation, or patrimonialisation, is here understood as “the process of commoditizing the past as a resource for consumption today” (Timothy & Więckowski, 2023, p. 221). It is a process where several assets related with these territories (memories, daily-life artifacts, monuments, sites, social practices, and places) and local communities can acquire a status of heritage that must be enhanced and protected for touristic purposes (see Gillot, Maffi & Trémon, 2013). As an inheritance from the past, heritage can be seen as a narrative determined by the relationship between memory, identity, values, and collective history. This means that meaning, significations and narratives need to be negotiated, especially because they are associated with different actors of the past (*e.g.*, state

= border guards, commoners = smugglers). Fortresses are in this context a conspicuous example, for they are buildings remind conflictive or mistrusting interstate relationships and are a significant part of the touristic assets in the border section examined here. This is particularly relevant in contexts where barriers to mobility become free-crossing areas and memory sites (cf. Elbel, 2022), and where there is a need to value more than the heritage assets associated with power groups (Timothy & Wiecechowski 2023, p. 222-223). Global history is, in this context, a good way to provide perspectives focused on interactions and entanglements in these areas before and after the processes of political delimitation (see, e.g., Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022; 2025).

The formation of large-scale networks and entanglement facilitated by the navigability of the river, whether it was used as a border or not, is one of the aspects that can be highlighted in a process of a cross-border heritage enhancement. From an archaeological perspective, the navigability of the Guadiana River was crucial for the integration of this area in the ancient “global” networks and for the formation of culturally diverse societies since, at least, the 1st millennium BC, a period when the Mediterranean trade with the Iberian Peninsula became more frequent and intense (Albuquerque, 2022b). Later, the river was used as a marker of the separation between the Roman provinces of *Baetica* and *Lusitania* from 27 BC onwards. During the Islamic period, the river was also used as a water road. This situation changed drastically in 1293, when Christian kingdoms of Castille and Portugal signed the Alcañices Treaty, which defined the Guadiana River as a border between Pomarão and Castro Marim/ Ayamonte. This process paved the way to the promotion of settlement in border areas in order to defend them (see, for instance, Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022).

One of the most relevant examples in the Guadiana is Mértola. This village was an ancient port of trade located in the interior of the Guadiana River, ca. de 70km from the river mouth. The archaeological record of several occupation phases (Iron Age, Roman, Christian and Muslim periods) reveal that these communities have people, products and ideas from different areas of the Mediterranean, as seen, for example, in epigraphy. In this case, archaeological works conducted in the village found inscriptions written, e.g., in Latin and Greek, as well as Jewish symbology. Indeed, one of the most highlighted features of this area is the fact that Mértola integrated quickly the several ideological and religious waves from the Mediterranean, which indicates that these communities were traditionally accustomed to coexisting with cultural diversity (see Torres, 2014).

The richness of this past, which is accessed through archaeology and History, can be used as an economic resource in order to help to overcome the current situation of one of the poorest and depopulated areas in Europe and promote economic growth and resilience (Jurado, 2023; Prokkola, 2023). The recognition of these issues is a determinant for the development of initiatives and research centred in cultural heritage and tourism (see *infra*). Consequently, it is important to provide an overview of the theoretical and methodological framework.

Methodology

The sources used in this manifold approach are varied and are part of different scientific approaches to border areas that are interconnected in order to provide a broad picture of the cultural landscape examined. The approaches include global history applied to border studies, history, archaeology, human geography, tourism, ethnography, linguistics, and cultural heritage. These sources allow one to identify regional issues that need to be addressed and to reconstruct long-term patterns of occupation and connectivity, as well as to examine a navigable river as a scenario of entanglements, more than separations. One of the most critical aspects of this approach is the riverbanks-centred analysis which contrast with historical and container-based narratives that interpret this river as a periphery of both Portugal and Spain (Andalusia in particular). On the other hand, an interdisciplinary knowledge (or collaborative work) about borderlands is crucial for a better understanding of the communities' needs and, consequently, for the delineation of research strategies.

This examination of border areas, especially when it deals with a wide diversity of scientific areas, is mainly based on bibliographical research and on the selection of cases that illustrate border complicities. For example, linguists are currently examining and enhancing language interpenetrations (among others, López de Aberasturi, 2023), which illustrate border complicities. In turn, these phenomena are closely related with smuggling that took place in border areas and put people from both sides of the border in contact (Castaño & Hernández, 2023). The fieldworks conducted in the last decades by anthropologists and philologists provided an interesting, though intangible, picture of the so-called “border paradox”, which was developed by Baud and van Schendel (1997). As van der Vleuten and Feys put it, “according to the so-called ‘border paradox’, borders trigger legal and illegal cross-border flows by virtue of the separations they create” (van der Vleuten & Feys, 2016).

This is the key for the interpretation of the long-term history of settlement and interaction in the Lower Guadiana navigable section before and after its use as a political border. The sources exposed here (history and archaeology) highlight the importance of micro-history in understanding border dynamics. While states often project an image of borders as rigid barriers or “no man’s lands,” micro-historical analysis reveals the specificities of everyday life and local interactions that contrast with these official narratives in temporal or spatial scales. By focusing on the micro-scale, researchers can characterise local reactions to regional or national processes, identifying how communities developed shared identities and complicities that still functioned independently of state intervention after the 13th century. Micro-history can also identify different relationships between specific border communities.

There are several examples of it. In the area examined in this paper, the author compared (with his collaborators) two different textual sources from the 18th century. Both were the result of surveys that were organised separately by Portuguese and Spanish kingdoms and counted with answers from local ecclesiastics. The former was undertaken in the middle of the 18th century, while the latter was written by Tomás López by the end

of that century. These sources provide an interesting picture of the past and present of the border relationships as seen by members of a specific group. In Sanlúcar de Gadiana/ Alcoutim, along with intermarriage, there were several conflicts between borderlanders, while in Ayamonte/ Castro Marim the main conflicts were related with fishing rights (Albuquerque, Herrera-Delgado & Malheiro-Cordeiro, 2025; see, for instance, the cross-border interactions of the 16th century in Ayamonte/ Castro Marim examined by Freitas, 2021). These studies allowed us to conclude, firstly, that the perception of these interactions and border crossings differ from one social group to another (see, *e.g.*, Hernández & Brito, 2022; Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022, with previous bibliography). Secondly, that the picture provided by these local studies does not need to be the same in other areas of the dyads, which is a steppingstone for further research.

The case-studies can be analysed from the perspective of global history. On the one hand, the Iberian borders can be studied in the way they were replicated overseas. This perspective will not be developed here (see, *e.g.*, Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022; 2025). On the other hand, these territories can be examined in the way local contexts can be affected by global processes, which determine, *e.g.*, the obsolescence of a settlement system or a site. A conspicuous example is, again, Mértola. The site grew from the 7th century onwards thanks to the development of commercial interactions with the Mediterranean through the Guadiana River. The river was an important water road until the 1960's, when the depletion of mining resources in São Domingos provoked the progressive abandonment of this area, in a process that affected also the mines from the Spanish side (Puerto de la Laja). Moreover, considering the whole the navigable section of the Guadiana River, the loss of relevance of borders also accelerated the obsolescence of these territories, especially after the Schengen Agreement.

Global history is also focused on entanglements from a cross-border perspective (see Conrad, 2016). However, borders were usually far from the interests of global historians, which inspired new bottom-up insights focused on border as spaces of complicities (Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022; 2025). Archaeology emerges in this context as a means to approaching this reality, by examining firstly settlement from a landscape or territorial perspective, and secondly by interpreting the record of archaeological sites such as Mértola, considering the latest advances of the knowledge of the Iron Age occupation (see Albuquerque, García Fernández & Fonte, 2025, with previous bibliography). This perspective is critical for the interpretation of the cultural heritage of the Lower Guadiana Basin for tourism purposes, as seen in the next chapter.

Cultural Heritage and Tourism in the navigable section of the Lower Guadiana River

[...] Border heritage is worthy of protection and commemoration to sustain memory, build solidarity, and to achieve the past so that it is not forgotten in a rapidly debordering world.

Timothy and Więckowski, 2023, p. 237

The academic interest in the relationship between borders and tourism has resulted in several publications in the last decades (among many others, Liberato et al. 2018; Pardo, Almeida & Campos, 2024; Prokkola, 2023; Timothy & Gelbman, 2013), while tourism is one of the most relevant focus of investment of the INTERREG programs in terms of cultural projects (for a detailed insight on this issue, see Durand, 2022), as it was recognised as an economic resource for local communities in these territories (Lois & Cairo, 2015).

The mobility scenario provided by the Schengen Agreement's free cross-border circulation, let alone the current tendency of "rebordering" intra-EU dyads along Europe (e.g., the Franco-German border in Strasbourg – Kiel) and Euroscepticism, have broaden people's horizons in terms of places to visit and made several regions more accessible, without needing to wait several hours to cross the border as before. The remoteness of some border areas, especially in the interior, as well as the possibility of easily crossing a border, are features that can make these destinations of "dividing lines" particularly attractive from the point of view of the visitors' experience (Pardo et al. 2018). In this context, two types can be highlighted: "tourism in the border" (focused on contrasts and ruptures) and "cross-border" (centred on convergence and shared features: Hernández-Ramírez, 2017, p. 386ff.) or "borderless" tourism (Jurado, 2023, p. 217–218). Consequently, there are two different, though complementary, ways of travel and interpret the border and both contribute to the "authenticity" of the experience.

A noticeable example of the idea of rupture is the slide that allows the visitor to cross the border between Sanlúcar de Guadiana (Spain) and Alcoutim (Portugal) (see fig. 3): "LIMITEZERO offers a unique and unforgettable experience, crossing the Guadiana River from Spain to Portugal via the world's first cross-border zipline. Spanning 720 meters that connect the two countries, participants fly over the river at speeds between 70 and 80 km/h, literally 'flying through time' as they gain an hour due to the time zone difference between the countries" (<https://www.limitezero.com/en/home/>). On the other hand, local memories constructed around smuggling and surveillance as a significant part of living in this border, paved the way for the implementation of a route (rota do contrabandista), the erection of statues that remind both the fiscal guards and the smugglers, and a festival between those villages, which constitutes a conspicuous example of shared heritage and memories around daily collaborations and complicities that became obsolete after the abolition of border controls. Both examples reveal that there are experiences that can only take place in border areas.

Beyond these experiences, cultural heritage (and consequently tourism) can also be seen as an opportunity for local development and cross-border cooperation, as well as for mitigating the effects of population decline (ageing, emigration, etc.) in those (mainly rural) areas affected by peripheralisation by creating job opportunities related to cultural heritage management (Albuquerque, 2023; Del Espino, 2020; García-Delgado, Martínez-Puche & Lois-González, 2020; Hernández-Ramírez, 2017, p. 393–397; Jurado, 2023; Pardo, Almeida & Campos, 2024) and empowering local authorities (European Movement International, 2026). In fact, in small villages such as Mértola, the enhancement of natural,

archaeological and ethnographic heritage through the Vila-Museu project by the Campo Arqueológico de Mértola (founded in 1978) was critical for a community that suffered the impacts of obsolescence (e.g., the depletion of mining resources in the late 1960's and the loss of relevance of fluvial commerce) in an interior area of the present-day Alentejo (Portugal) (Del Espino, 2020; Palma et al. 2025; see *infra*) (fig. 1).

Customs buildings, which represent the physical manifestation of borders, are also examples of resignification and frequently became museums or interpretation centres (cf. Prokkola, 2023, p. 353–354; Timothy & Więckowski, 2023, p. 229). In several borders, these buildings became “memory sites” and objects of “heritage-making”, which occurs, as M. Lois and H. Cairo accurately state, “when spaces, individuals, objects and so on are re-constructed, re-interpreted or, in general terms, affected [...] in order to fabricate heritage values” (2015, p. 323) and new narratives or negotiations for identity/ memory-making around both state delimitation, transgression (*ibid.*, p. 325) and cultural features that result from encounters (Albuquerque, 2022a). In the Lower Guadiana basin, the customs building of Vila Real de Santo António is still in use but now is a ticket office for the ferry (which was the only way to cross the border in this area). On the other side, in the Aduana of Ayamonte are currently the headquarters of the Chamber of commerce.

Other assets, such as the Casas da Guarda Fiscal (Fiscal Guard's houses) in this area represent the materialisation of the abandonment provoked by the abolishment of border controls or, in other words, they are an example of how global processes affect local histories. Approximately twelve of these buildings can be found between Vila Real de Santo António and Pomarão if one observes the 1/25000 Portuguese maps. They are positioned strategically close to the riverbanks in places where crossings can be efficiently controlled. Now most of them lie in ruins (fig. 2).

Figure 2: Abandoned Fiscal Guard's house near Alcoutim, Portugal (photo by the author)



Surveillance and Smuggling are the obverse and reverse of bordering, i.e., they can be seen as opposites, but they are inextricably linked to the processes triggered by artificial separations imposed by states. For D.J. Timothy and M. Więckowski, “stories of smuggling or transborder raids are endemic to borderland throughout the world and have become a salient part of local identities and folklore, even to the extent of heroifying famous local outlaws and valorising a general sense of lawlessness” (Timothy & Więckowski, 2023, p. 227). Indeed, there are several museums focused on smuggling along the Portuguese-Spanish border, such as the Museu do Contrabando in Santana de Cambas (Municipality of Mértola, Portugal) in the region examined in this paper, as well as the aforementioned Festival do Contrabando in Sanlúcar de Guadiana/ Alcoutim. On the other hand, it there is a noteworthy example of the image of smuggling as part of the local memories: in Soutelinho da Raia (Northeastern Portugal), an 18th century fresco depicts a miracle of Saint Anthony helping the smuggler to run from the policemen, which reveals the relationship between the state and border populations. That is, the “other”, from the perspective of a borderlander, is the state, not the individual of the neighbouring country (see Kavanagh, 2000).

The defence buildings disseminated along the border are by far the most eloquent examples of the border scenography and consequently they are perhaps the most famous touristic destinations. This fact explains the investment made on these assets in the last years, such as restorations (e.g., in Sanlúcar de Guadiana and Alcoutim: Hernández-Ramírez, 2017, pp. 399–401; a broader overview in Duclos, 2002; fig. 3) that remind hostile relationships in the past that contrast with a peaceful and collaborative present. Nonetheless, in the two villages that share the Guadiana River (Fig. 3), several decades of strict surveillance and prohibition of crossing left a scar in the lives of local communities (cf. Hernández & Brito, 2022), which means that these villages configure what can be called a “phantom border”.

Figure 3: Sanlúcar de Guadiana (Spain/ Andalusia, left) and Alcoutim (Portugal, right) seen from the Castelo Velho of Alcoutim (Photo by F.J. García Fernández and P. Albuquerque)



Another interesting aspect of this discussion is the linguistic evidence, which is interpreted as a “sociological osmosis” constructed by centuries of the socioeconomic ties and entanglements that took place in the Iberian dyad (López, 2023, p. 187). The hybridisation of languages in border areas is a phenomenon that is on the brink of disappearing because of the population ageing and the lack of interactions provoked by the abolition of border controls (most of this interpenetration was due to smuggling).

Finally, archaeological evidence, which will be discussed in the next chapter, provides interesting details about the evolution of settlement along the riverbanks of the navigable sections, which is a steppingstone for the enhancement of these territories as a shared cultural heritage related with ancient “globalisations”.

The archaeology of the navigable section of the Guadiana River

“Les frontières sont du temps inscrit dans l’espace” (Foucher, 2007, p. 28). Archaeological and historical viewpoints are crucial for the documentation and interpretation of long-term human occupation in the territories that currently share a border, by allowing one to examine the evolution of settlement and landscape before and after territorial delimitations (e.g., Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2025). Archaeology is a tool for approaching ancient lifeways and interactions beyond the (also partial) information provided by texts. Consequently, the integration of this perspective in the study and enhancement of border heritage provides new and complementary research avenues.

In the last decade, several publications were dedicated to the archaeology and border heritage of the Lower Guadiana Basin in the context of research projects focused on the settlement along the riverbanks between the beginning of the 1st millennium BC and the 1st century AD. Projects such as *Ana-lise/ Ana-lisis* (2015-2022) have sought to overcome a container-based perspective of the archaeological reality of the navigable section by studying the river as a single unit of analysis, considering mainly the occupation of the immediate surroundings of the riverbanks (*ca.* 5km for each side: Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2019; Albuquerque, 2022b).

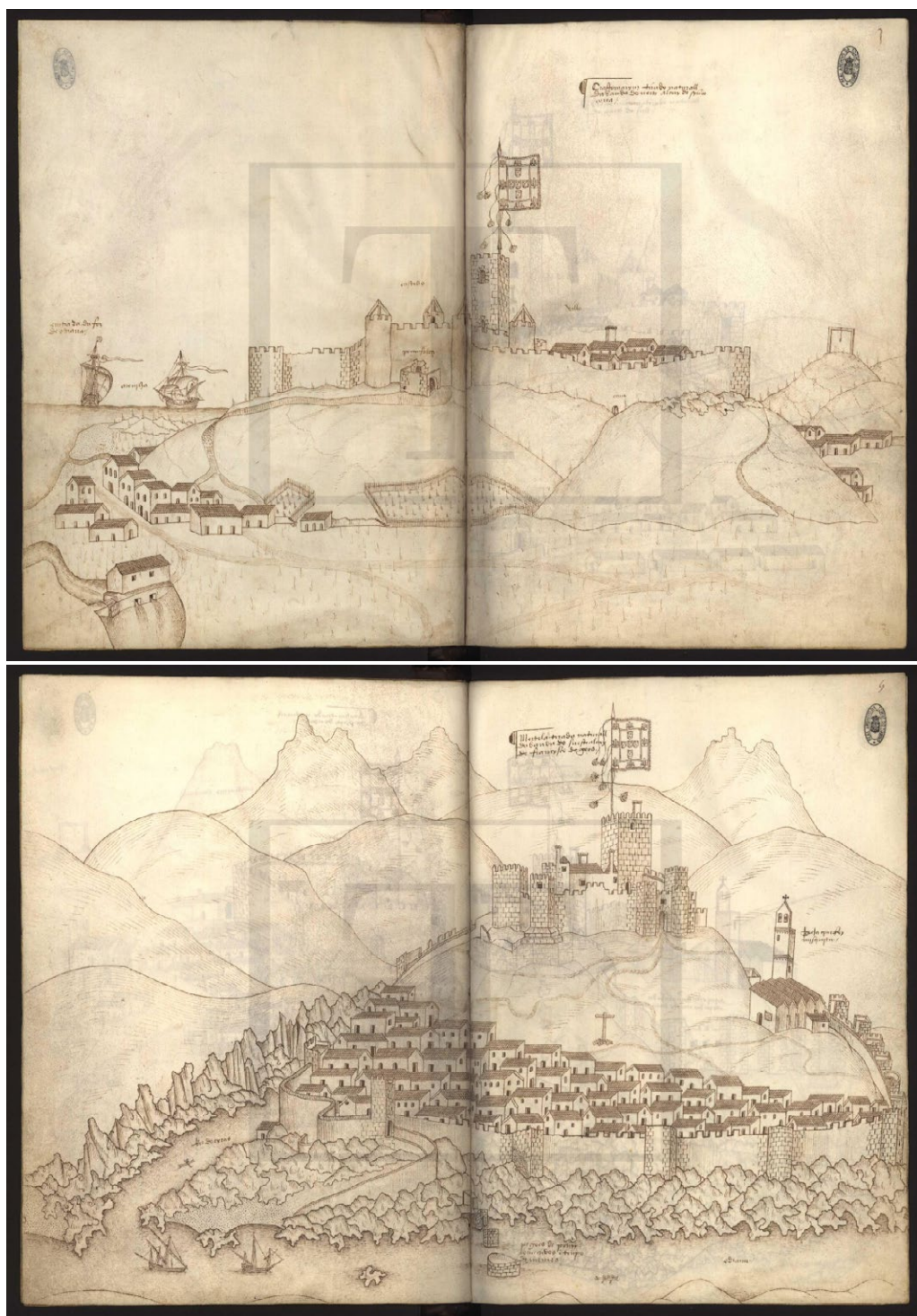
A central aspect of the studies conducted is the significant disparity in archaeological knowledge between the Portuguese (right) and Spanish (left) banks of the Guadiana (e.g., Albuquerque, 2022b). This “decompensation” is particularly evident in the interior territories between Pomarão and the estuary (the section shared by the two countries: see fig. 1). The right (Portuguese) bank is better known thanks to the work of research and heritage management in border municipalities (Castro Marim, Alcoutim, and Mértola), as well as to the activities of preventive archaeology in several infrastructure projects, which led to the identification of several archaeological sites. Comparatively, the knowledge of the left (Spanish) bank is scarce, especially in the interior, where there are few infrastructures and investment. In fact, most research has been concentrated in coastal and pre-coastal areas like Ayamonte.

The identification of these issues is a stimulus for the development of alternative strategies of collaborating works in dyads. In the recent years, research has been complemented by non-invasive survey methods that allow researchers to identify new potential archaeological sites. Consequently, it is important to dedicate few words to the use of LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) in the surveying of the Lower Guadiana Basin. For example, this technology allowed us to review the Mértola's Iron Age defensive wall (Albuquerque, García & Fonte 2025, fig. 5). The data collected in this area (remains of buildings like fortifications, enclosures or road systems that can have topographic visibility). The chronology of these structures can only be defined in a complementary pedestrian survey, and the buried structures can be examined by invasive (excavations) or non-invasive methods (e.g., geophysics). It is noteworthy that the fact that both Portugal and Spain have (despite some differences) have published LiDAR topographic datasets with high resolution both in Portugal and Spain. Until a few years ago, only Spain had this coverage, which means that now it is possible to start new research after a careful analysis of data. The use of LiDAR technology is crucial for the development of cross-border archaeological research programmes, as well as for territorial planning. The goal of this activity is to identify visible structures in the Lower Guadiana's navigable section and validate the data with pedestrian surveys, which will be especially helpful in the identification of potential archaeological sites in the Spanish riverbank. In the next years, it is hoped that this ongoing investigation can allow one to prepare future pedestrian surveys and, consequently, shed some light on the knowledge of human settlement of the left bank of the river.

In addition, the results of archaeological works conducted by the Ana-lise/ Ana-lisis project in the navigable section of the Guadiana River have broaden our understanding of the occupation of the riverbanks, as well as of multicultural settlements such as Mértola (ancient Myrtilis). Firstly, the pedestrian survey campaigns conducted in Portugal identified several archaeological sites (cf. Albuquerque, 2022b, with previous bibliography), while the excavation of the Iron Age necropolises of Hoya de los Rastros (Ayamonte), from 8th century BC, by the German Archaeological Institute (Marzoli & García Teyssandier, 2019) and, upriver, Largo do Terreiro da Feira (Mértola), from the 6th – 5th century BC provided crucial information about the integration of this region in the Mediterranean koine during the 1st millennium BC. The excavations undertaken in this necropolis have provided crucial evidence of this ancient cultural diversity, as well as in other areas of this village, such as the municipal Library (Albuquerque, García & Fonte 2025, with previous bibliography).

For example, funerary architecture reveals a myriad of influences of the local background, of the Southeastern Iberia and of other areas of the interior of the Iberian Peninsula, which is revealing of the above-mentioned cultural integration of diverse cultural elements. Conversely, archaeological materials can be related with the Guadalquivir Basin (Andalusia, Spain) and the Bay of Cadiz (see some preliminary remarks in Miguel et al. 2019).

Figure 4: Castro Marim and Mértola in 1509 (after Duarte d'Armas).



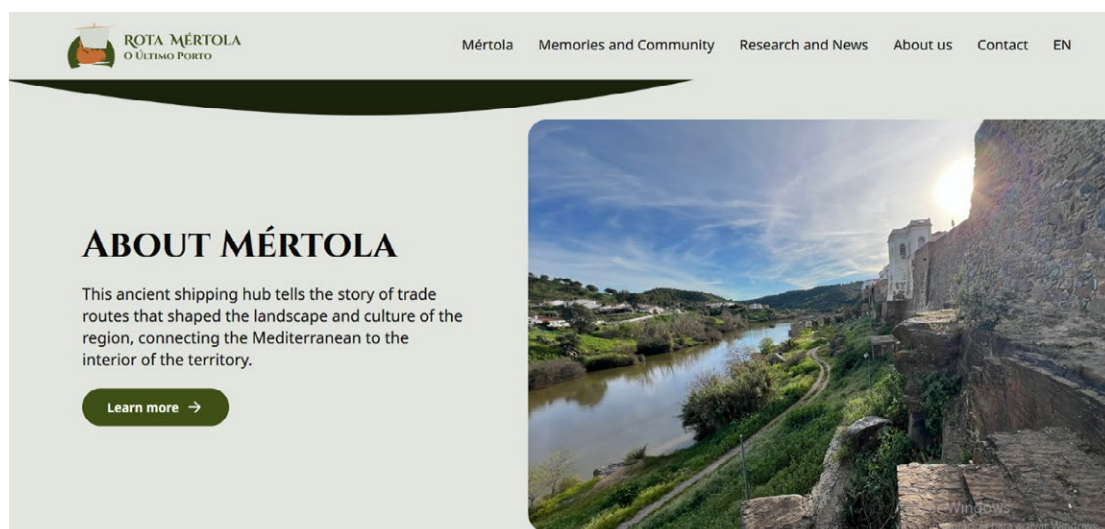
Source: <https://digitalq.arquivos.pt/en/documentDetails/72c4eeea2882461282ff1c6849e417e6>

These archaeological works conducted in the Lower Guadiana River are fundamental for reconstructing the evolution of border landscape before and after the political delimitation of the 13th century AD. One of the most relevant aspects of this examination is the fact that the Guadiana River functioned as a vital communication “water road” that articulated human occupation through a network of ports and commercial nodes defined by permeability and intercultural interaction, especially between the 1st millennium and the end of Islamic domination. In fact, the river lost a great part of its commercial relevance after this period, and the most relevant sites were fortified as strategic points for border surveillance, such as Castro Marim and Mértola, as mentioned. These villages, as well as others that were disseminated along the boundaries of Portugal, were depicted by Duarte d’Armas in 1509 – 1510 in a document that was intended to be a thorough description of the Portuguese borders. As seen in a vast bibliography, textual evidence prove that local communities seem to maintain networks and contacts beyond the intervention of states (see, e.g., Albuquerque & García 2022).

From a heritage perspective, the systematic archaeological recovery of Mértola was fundamentally catalysed by the founding of the Campo Arqueológico de Mértola (CAM) in 1978. For decades, this institution has centred its research mainly on the Islamic, using it as a leitmotif for the city’s identity and its biannual Islamic Festival. However, recent scholarship emphasises the necessity of expanding the analytical scope to earlier periods in this village, such as the Iron Age, which was historically undervalued or scarcely explored by the institution (Albuquerque, García & Fonte, 2025). This shift aims to define the complete urban structure of the city throughout the first millennium BC, recognising that Mértola’s significance as a “global port” predates the Roman and Medieval period.

In this context, programmes such as *Promove – O futuro do interior* (“Promote – the future of the interior”) by La Caixa Foundation, funded dissemination projects that could contribute to the sustainable development of these areas and the empowerment of local communities. One of the projects that was funded is ROTA Mértola, O último porto/ROUTE Mértola, The Last Port (fig. 5; <https://rotamertola.pt/en/>), which is based on the long history of the navigability between Pomarão and Mértola (fig. 1) to promote the implementation of touristic routes by river, focusing on archaeological information about this landscape. Even though the project is being conducted in the Portuguese section of the Guadiana River, it can be replicated in other border municipalities between Pomarão and the Eurocity of Guadiana, especially because the abolition of border controls is an opportunity for the creation of cross-border fluvial routes and for the enhancement of cultural heritage associated with it (cf. Jurado, 2023).

Figure 5: Printscreen of ROTA-Mértola website



As noted above, tourism is one of the most important elements of cross-border territorial cooperation, as seen in the number of projects funded by INTERREG programmes within this scope (e.g., Durand, 2022; Jurado, 2023, p. 223ff). Archaeotourism, or archaeology-based tourism, can be a key element in the development of rural areas, as well as in the process of community-building (Del Espino, 2020; De Man, 2016; Fernández Ortea, 2017)³. The study of Blanca del Espino (2020) highlights the impact of projects such as Mértola Vila-Museu in this Portuguese municipality focusing, for example, in demographic data. One of the conclusions is that it is possible that the job opportunities related to heritage increased and, consequently, curbed (though partially) the impact of demographic decline in the areas where there are more heritage assets.

Archaeological sites can be used as tools for interpreting border landscapes as testimonies of the relationships between communities and the natural (with repercussions, e.g., in the analysis of climate changes) and social environments. Consequently, it seems necessary to expand in the next years the research to the Andalusian side of the border in order to obtain a broader understanding of settlement dynamics in the region from a diachronic perspective.

In the case examined here, archaeotourism based on the river and its navigability can be an excellent attraction, especially because the perception of the territory from the river is key to understanding settlement patterns and the function of archaeological sites within a larger territory. In fact, this idea motivates the development of archaeological surveys along a section of the Guadiana River north from Mértola (fig. 6). Moreover, its study and interpretation can consider the way bordering changes landscapes and trigger new

3 See, e.g., the works of CSIC in the archaeological site of Casas de Turuñuelo de Guareña (<https://www.tartesoencomunidad.org/p/tarteso-en-comunidad.html>), which is an example of a site that is being used as a base for strengthening identities in local communities.

social phenomena or, in other words, activate what can be called the “border paradox” (cf. Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2025; Baud & Van Schendel 1997) without changing the nature of interconnections that took place for several centuries in this territory.

Figure 6: Archaeological surveys conducted in the river (ANA-lise/ ANA-lisis project), which inspired the archaeological route proposed in ROTA (Photo by F.J. García Fernández)



Global history emerges in this context as a key for the interpretation of this heritage, by focusing on the river as a water road that connected communities before and after the 13th century and paved the way for cultural entanglements. A diachronic and bottom-up overview allows us to identify the impact of bordering in local communities and in the settlement along the river, and also to overcome the image of separations created by states by providing a real cross-border interpretation and heritagisation of these territories by highlighting their unique cultural features and identify the several phases of settlement.

Concluding remarks

Border dwelling characteristics, unique to either side of the line, become dominant moulders of the cultural landscape within the shadow thrown by the boundary, and yet these characteristics disappear as one moves away from the borderland in either direction into the territorial domain of the states divided.

Minghi, 1991, p. 15

The “bottom-up” approach proposed here is essential for interpreting borders not just as political limits, but as permeable spaces of transition and cultural flows. In few words, borders are interesting cases for examining intercultural encounters and the effects of cultural diversity in culturally and socially unique landscapes. Global history provides

some theoretical directions to the examination of this cultural landscape, especially in terms of the examination of interactions, as seen in recent publications. The historical and archaeological study of local contexts is helpful to understand how broader historical processes affect directly the lives of the communities that inhabit(ed) these territories along the centuries and shaped the cultural landscapes. It is also crucial for the heritagisation and interpretation of border areas.

The intertwined histories and identities of border regions and communities is one of the most relevant topics in the examination of their past. The search for a common identity of borderlanders obscures the identification of contexts where diversity is the main feature. The discourses for the enhancement and interpretation of cultural heritage in the Iberian dyad, particularly in the area examined here, could value concomitantly differences as part of the uniqueness and diversity of border landscapes. Consequently, the search for common elements may lead to overlook other situations that shaped different manifestations: e.g., in terms of gastronomy, the importance of fish in Alcoutim and of meat in Sanlúcar de Guadiana, or the linguistic encounters in border areas due to informal or unofficial interactions. In sum, divergences do not need to be excluded from the heritagisation of border areas, for they are also a part of the history of these landscapes. In other words, the richness of border areas lies precisely in the diversity of cultural traits and of interactions between local communities (Albuquerque, 2022a).

Regarding pre-existing routes, although the Cross-border Cultural Route already includes points of high archaeological value, such as Mértola (“Museum-Village”), the archaeological site of Montinho das Laranjeiras, and the Castles of Castro Marim and Alcoutim, these resources are often underutilised or viewed as incipient and isolated offerings. The absence of an integrated management strategy and a common tourist brand (such as “Guadiana-Border”) means that this archaeological heritage has not yet been fully converted into a consolidated tourist product in regional planning. Consequently, it is hoped that archaeological and historical research could contribute to study the past of these territories and provide further directions for the enhancement of cultural heritage in cultural landscapes shaped by centuries of interaction.

Notwithstanding, governance is still an important subject of discussion in the context of cross-border cooperation, e.g., in terms of cultural tourism (Liberato et al. 2018) and common identities or senses of belonging, especially because borders can be perceived both as “an object of integration and as a scar on people and space” (Durand, 2022, p. 307). Moreover, there are considerable differences between Portugal and Spain in terms of local policies. Different legislations and bureaucratic processes can be a barrier for the implementation of cross-border projects, e.g., centred in archaeology (García, Del Espino & Albuquerque, 2017, p. 136–137). These obstacles need to be identified in order to promote cultural touristic routes focused on the archaeological record of current border areas and to promote an actual cooperation between countries without the invisible barriers imposed by territorial boundaries.

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Reconstructing Citizenship After Brexit: European Identity and Legal Membership Among British Nationals Living in France

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Abstract

This article examines how the United Kingdom's (UK) withdrawal from the European Union (EU) in 2016, commonly known as '*Brexit*', has affected the lives, citizenship status, and European identity of British nationals who continue to reside in EU Member States.

Focusing specifically on the experiences of British nationals living in France, this study used qualitative interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025 to explore whether the loss of European citizenship had altered their sense of belonging (to the UK, the EU, and their country of residence), and how they had coped with the legal and administrative consequences of Brexit.

The interviews revealed that some British nationals applied for French citizenship to ensure they could remain in France following the 2016 referendum, identifying themselves as '*British and European*'. Conversely, whilst some British nationals remained in France after obtaining a residence permit under the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement, others were refused this permit and were not considered eligible to remain in France. This study focused specifically on the views of British nationals who had worked for European and international organisations regarding their identity and citizenship. The findings suggest that the particular circumstances of these international civil servants, who fall outside the scope of the Withdrawal Agreement, have created a situation of vulnerability. To address this situation, the study examined the current status of their efforts to reconstruct their citizenship in order to continue living in France. It revealed that tracing ancestral roots to an EU Member State and applying for naturalisation, regardless of place of residence or the presence of a national identity, is emerging as a strategy for regaining EU citizenship rights.

Keywords: Brexit, European Identity, European Citizenship, Migration

Introduction

Five years have passed since the United Kingdom (UK) withdrew from the European Union (EU), an event commonly known as Brexit. This article examines how Brexit has affected the lives, citizenship status, and European identity of British nationals who have continued to reside in EU Member States.

For the first time since the EU was founded, a Member State withdrew from the Union, and, as a result, its citizens lost their EU citizenship. As EU citizenship guarantees the right to move freely, reside, and participate in political life within the EU, the impact on everyday life has been significant. Consequently, the UK and the EU concluded the Withdrawal Agreement under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and established a transition period lasting until 31 December 2020 to protect citizens' rights.

Following Brexit, more than 3 million EU nationals residing in the UK lost the rights of entry, residence, and employment previously granted to EU citizens. There has been considerable qualitative research on changes in their residence status and citizenship (Castellani, 2024), as well as on the residential insecurity resulting from these changes (Zontini & Genova, 2022). In particular, attention has focused on the changes brought about by Brexit for migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), who constitute a particularly large proportion of the UK migrant population (Siklodi, 2023; Moscal, 2025). In contrast, there has been very little research on British nationals who have migrated to continental Europe. Suzuki (2020) highlighted that approximately one million British nationals residing in EU Member States are at risk of losing their EU citizenship and revealed that some of them are choosing to naturalise because of concerns about their livelihoods in their countries of residence and dissatisfaction with losing their right to vote in local elections. Furthermore, Benson (2020) pointed out that Brexit has created new boundaries among British nationals residing in France regarding the acquisition of residence rights and that they are being judged on whether they are eligible to reside in Europe.

This article aims to update these findings five years after the end of the transition period. It presents a qualitative analysis based on interview data to clarify changes in the lives, citizenship, and identity of British residents in France.

This article is organised into four sections. First, it explains the background to the emergence of '*European identity*' and '*European citizenship*'. Second, it examines the implications of the loss of EU citizenship, using British residents in France as a case study, by analysing the Brexit process and its impact on EU citizens. It then outlines the interview survey conducted with British residents in France between July 2023 and March 2025 and presents the analytical framework. The findings focus specifically on the views on identity and citizenship held by British nationals who had worked for European or international organisations. Finally, the article identifies the forms of identity found among British residents in France and outlines the current state of their efforts to reconstruct their citizenship in order to continue living in France.

European identity and European citizenship

The concept of European identity emerged during the 1970s and 1980s as the European Community (EC) sought to strengthen political cohesion among its Member States (European Communities, 1976). In pursuing the idea of a '*Citizens' Europe*', the EC attempted to foster a European identity through the introduction of rights associated with European citizenship—including freedom of movement, residence, and political rights within the EC—as well as through the promotion of European symbols such as the flag, passport, and single currency. These principles were later codified in Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union (the Maastricht Treaty), signed in 1992.

European citizenship does not replace national citizenship granted by sovereign states. Rather, it allows individuals to maintain multiple forms of belonging and thus facilitates multiple identities (Heater, 1997). Similar to Habermas's concept of constitutional patriotism, European citizenship may be understood as a form of post-national citizenship founded upon shared legal and political principles. All nationals of EU Member States are EU citizens and enjoy equal rights, including freedom of movement and residence within the EU, as well as the right to vote and stand as candidates in municipal and European Parliament elections in their country of residence. Today, these rights are guaranteed under Article 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and Article 45 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Citizenship is generally understood to consist of three dimensions: rights and duties, participation, and identity (Lister & Pia, 2008). EU citizenship has often been criticised for emphasising rights without imposing corresponding obligations (Wihtol de Wenden, 1999). Furthermore, while acquiring the nationality of an EU Member State automatically confers EU citizenship, the EU itself has no authority to determine who qualifies as a citizen. This limitation became particularly visible in debates surrounding so-called '*golden passport*' programs, through which some Member States, such as Cyprus and Malta, granted nationality to third-country nationals. In response, the European Commission argued that EU citizenship requires a '*genuine link*' with the Union (European Commission, 2020).

Consequently, there is a tendency for people to acquire the citizenship of another country in order to gain easier access to it (Kim, 2019; Mateos & Durand, 2012). In particular, the recognition of dual nationality lowers the psychological barrier to obtaining a second passport. This constitutes '*compensatory citizenship*' (Harpaz, 2019); in countries such as Italy and Spain, where citizenship is granted to descendants of South American nationals based on *jus sanguinis*, a European passport allows free movement within the EU. However, because this external citizenship is granted without any residence requirement, it lacks a '*genuine link*' with the state. For this reason, external citizenship, citizenship by investment, and European citizenship have been described as forms of '*citizenship light*' (Joppke, 2018). Indeed, the question has been posed: '*citizenship on paper or at heart?*' (Yanasmayan, 2014).

Moreover, EU citizenship is defined solely by the nationality of a Member State. It does not require loyalty to Europe, linguistic competence, or self-identification as European. Consequently, European identity differs from national identity in that it lacks a fixed

and clearly defined foundation. In response to this situation, Joppke (2018) termed this phenomenon citizenship's '*liberal de-dutification*'. This raises an important question: to what extent does EU citizenship foster a sense of European identity among its citizens?

Brexit and its consequences

The UK joined the EC during a period when debates surrounding European identity were particularly prominent. However, Eurostat surveys consistently demonstrated that national attachment among British citizens remained stronger than attachment to Europe when compared with the average across the Member States. British Euroscepticism towards the transfer of sovereignty to European institutions became particularly visible under Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s, when she famously demanded, '*I want my money back*', in negotiations concerning the UK's contribution to the EC budget.

Similar rhetoric reappeared during the 2016 referendum on EU membership. Advocates of withdrawal promoted the slogan '*Take back control*' and ultimately succeeded in securing a majority vote in favour of leaving the EU. Brexit represented the first withdrawal of a Member State in the history of the European Union.

For the EU, Brexit constituted a profound crisis. One interpretation suggests that the process exposed political instability and democratic deficiencies within the UK (Berrod, 2020). Following the unexpected referendum result, in which approximately 51 per cent voted in favour of leaving the EU, Prime Minister David Cameron resigned. His successor, Theresa May, formally notified the EU of the UK's intention to withdraw under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) in March 2017.

However, the two-year withdrawal negotiation process failed to produce a final agreement within the prescribed timeframe, leading to significant conflict between the government and Parliament. Furthermore, the concerns of Scotland and Northern Ireland, where majorities of 56 per cent and 62 per cent, respectively, had voted to remain in the EU, were largely disregarded. In Gibraltar, which is directly connected to Spain, a striking 96 per cent of voters supported remaining in the EU (Sacramento & Castan Pinos, 2000, p. 196). Gibraltar became the only British Overseas Territory to be granted full British citizenship in 1981; a decisive factor was Gibraltar's status within the European Economic Community (EEC). Following Brexit, as the only British territory on the European continent, the people of Gibraltar once again found themselves in a unique position as supporters of Europe (Norton, 2024).

According to Berrod (2020), this series of events revealed the internal and external undemocratic consequences of the Brexit referendum. It thus laid bare the irony that, although Brexit was intended to '*take back control*', it instead resulted in political deadlock and a loss of control.

Another democratic problem concerned the voting rights of British citizens residing abroad. Under UK electoral law, British citizens who had lived outside the country for more than fifteen years lost their right to vote. As a consequence, many British citizens

residing in other EU Member States were not allowed to vote in the 2016 referendum, despite the fact that its outcome would directly affect their lives (Suzuki, 2020). Although many had lived and worked in EU Member States for decades, they were denied the opportunity to vote on whether the UK should remain in the EU.

The effect of Brexit on EU citizens' rights and British nationals living in EU countries

Brexit also created uncertainty regarding EU citizenship. The rights of EU citizens residing and working in the UK, as well as those of British nationals residing in other EU countries, became central issues during the withdrawal negotiations. Following the UK's formal departure from the EU on 31 January 2020, the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement established a transition period lasting until the end of that year, during which EU law continued to apply in the UK. During this transition period, more than three million EU citizens residing in the UK and over one million British nationals residing in EU Member States were required to apply for residence permits in order to maintain their legal status in their country of residence. The Withdrawal Agreement was designed to preserve existing rights, yet the loss of EU citizenship meant that residence permits effectively became substitutes for the rights previously guaranteed by European citizenship.

From 1 January 2021 onwards, EU citizens wishing to enter or remain in the UK for longer than ninety days became subject to immigration controls applicable to third-country nationals. Conversely, British citizens lost their freedom of movement, residence and employment throughout the EU, as well as their voting rights in municipal and European Parliament elections in their country of residence.

The consequences of losing EU citizenship had never previously been experienced because no Member State had ever withdrawn from the Union. While EU nationals living in the UK also experienced changes to their rights as a result of Brexit, they retained EU citizenship through their national citizenship. British nationals therefore became the first population in the history of European integration to lose EU citizenship collectively.

Since Brexit, research has been conducted focusing on EU citizens residing in the UK, particularly those from CEE (Siklodi, 2023; Moscal, 2025), Italians and Bulgarians (Zantoni & Genova, 2022), and French nationals (Castellani, 2024), examining their anxieties regarding residency, perceptions of citizenship, and sense of belonging. In contrast, there has been little research addressing British citizens residing in EU Member States or their anxieties regarding residence rights and citizenship following Brexit. According to Auer and Tetlow (2023), statistics show that the number of British nationals migrating to EU countries has increased significantly since the referendum. This trend was observed among British nationals residing in Germany who naturalised by the end of 2020, aiming to reduce the adverse effects of Brexit on their lives, particularly uncertainty about the

future and a worsening economic outlook. In particular, the availability of dual nationality has provided British nationals with a strong incentive to obtain a second passport, with relatively little additional administrative burden (Auer & Tetlow, 2023).

British nationals living in France

This article investigates whether British nationals who have continued to reside in the EU have been able to maintain their previous way of life under the protections provided by the Withdrawal Agreement and whether their citizenship status and identities have changed. France was selected as the principal case study for three reasons.

Firstly, France has long been a major country of immigration, receiving migrants from the Maghreb, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and elsewhere throughout the twentieth century. Less widely recognised, however, is the significant increase in British migration to France since the early 2000s, particularly following the global financial crisis when migration flows from other regions declined (Suzuki, 2011, p. 46–47). British migrants differ substantially from other immigrant groups in France. Whereas many migrants arrive in urban areas seeking employment, a large proportion of British migrants are retirees, generally not economically active and living in the countryside. Previous ethnographic research has identified a broader phenomenon of International Retirement Migration (IRM), particularly towards Mediterranean regions (King, Warnes & Williams, 2000). Southern France, such as the Nouvelle-Aquitaine, has become one of the preferred destinations for British retirees seeking a better climate, lower living costs, and a higher quality of life than that available in the UK (Benson, 2010; King, Warnes & Williams, 2000).

Secondly, British nationals, known as Eurosceptics, have benefited from the positive effects of European integration and European citizenship. Developments in transport infrastructure, including Eurostar rail services (Favell, 2008) and low-cost airlines such as Ryanair, have facilitated increasingly affordable mobility between Britain and France. Combined with EU citizenship rights guaranteeing freedom of movement, residence, and employment, these developments enabled British nationals to engage easily in travel and cross-border mobility. Furthermore, British nationals living in France have demonstrated relatively high levels of political participation compared with other EU migrant groups. A notable number of British residents have served as municipal councilors in local French governments (Suzuki, 2015, p. 27). However, as a result of losing their EU citizenship due to Brexit, they have been excluded from political participation. This point had a strongly negative impact on their way of life.

Thirdly, France is host to a large number of international organisations. Many diplomats from the UK, a founding member of the Council of Europe (CoE) and a member of the EC since the 1970s, are also stationed there; they are engaged in specialist work directly related to European integration and have been resident in France for many years.

Thus, amongst British nationals residing in France, there are two distinct groups: ‘*newcomers*’—non-economic migrants who utilise their EU citizenship for tourism or settlement—and ‘*oldcomers*’—long-term residents engaged in specialised professional work, often directly linked to European integration. It is rare to find an EU Member State encompassing both of these categories with a large enough population. Although these British nationals living in France have relied on European integration and the rights of European citizens, maintaining their previous way of life has become more difficult following the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

The meaning of losing EU citizenship for British nationals in France

How has Brexit transformed the citizenship status of British nationals residing in France? Prior to Brexit, British nationals enjoyed the same rights as French, Polish, and other EU citizens, including freedom of movement, residence, and employment. Following Brexit, however, British nationals ceased to be EU citizens and became third-country nationals, legally comparable to Japanese and other third-country nationals residing in the EU.

The EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement guarantees residence rights for British nationals who had already exercised their right to free movement before Brexit; however, it does not guarantee political rights. Since EU citizenship is reserved for nationals of EU Member States, British nationals who lost EU citizenship also lost the political rights associated with it.

Consequently, Members of the European Parliament elected from the UK ceased to hold office on 1 February 2020. Voting rights in local elections became dependent upon national legislation in each Member State. Some countries concluded bilateral arrangements with the UK allowing British nationals to continue participating in local elections. Others, including France, announced that British citizens would no longer enjoy the right to vote or stand as candidates in municipal elections following Brexit (EPRS, 2020, p. 15–17). As a result, 760 British local councillors living in France were unable to stand as candidates in the local council elections held in March 2020. For these British residents, who had been deeply involved in community activities, exclusion from the candidate lists was a major blow; for the local authorities, it also meant losing an important link with their British residents (Leduc, 2020).

Existing sociological research has explored changes in European belonging among British residents in France following Brexit. According to Suzuki (2020), British residents in Dordogne and Alsace expressed frustration during interviews that they had been excluded from the Brexit referendum because of the UK’s electoral rules and anxiety about whether they would have been able to vote to remain. As a result, many found themselves in a situation in which they had lost political rights in both their country of nationality and their country of residence. That study also revealed that political participation and attachment to local communities contributed to a stronger sense of citizenship, leading some respondents to consider acquiring French nationality in order to regain citizenship

rights. Benson (2020) also argues that the loss of European citizenship generated significant insecurity among British residents in the Lot region and points out that Brexit introduced new border procedures for British citizens residing within the EU. Because their legal status had previously been guaranteed through freedom of movement, they had rarely needed to apply for residence permits. As a result, British nationals increasingly found themselves evaluated according to whether they were considered ‘*deserving*’ or ‘*undeserving*’ of ‘*the privilege of staying put*’ (Benson, 2020, p. 508). Some British nationals sought to secure their future by applying for residence permits, permanent residence status, or French nationality. Others, however, encountered significant obstacles: retirees who failed to satisfy financial requirements or individuals lacking family support occasionally faced rejection of residence applications and, in some cases, were even issued orders to leave French territory (Benson, 2020).

Overview of the survey

Research purpose, questions and methodology

Therefore, Brexit has rendered life in France more insecure for many British nationals. In response, they have sought to reconstruct forms of citizenship through new legal status and alternative pathways to residence. However, the aforementioned studies were published in 2020 and therefore did not examine the longer-term consequences following the end of the transition period. This paper seeks to fill the five-year gap following Brexit by examining the impact that the loss of EU citizenship has had on the sense of belonging and identity of British nationals residing in France. It is based on the assumption that citizenship rights may contribute to the development of attachment to the political community that grants those rights. From this perspective, two principal research questions were formulated: Does the loss of EU citizenship also lead to the loss of European identity? (RQ1); How has Brexit affected British nationals’ sense of belonging and citizenship? (RQ2).

The author therefore conducted a follow-up study based on interviews with British nationals residing in France, carried out immediately after the referendum. Adopting a phenomenological qualitative research approach, the author sought to elucidate the changes in everyday life and sense of belonging brought about by Brexit. As this method aims to capture each individual’s unique experiences, the relatively small sample size is consistent with the aims of phenomenological qualitative research. Five respondents had previously participated in interviews conducted by the author in 2017, allowing for a longitudinal comparison of their experiences before and after Brexit.

To supplement these accounts, a further 10 participants were recruited using snowball sampling during a sabbatical in France, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 15 participants between August 2023 and March 2025, including fieldwork conducted in August 2023, June–December 2024, and January–March 2025. Eleven of the interviews were conducted face-to-face at their homes, offices or cafés, whilst four were conducted online.

As the author is fluent in French, the interviews were often conducted in French; however, most of the interviewees spoke French extremely fluently. Some interviewees, who were not comfortable with French, were interviewed in English. This reflected the fact that those interviewees had lived in France for less than ten years. In this article, interview content was translated into English and kept anonymous.

Each interview took about an hour, and if there were any questions, these were asked later by email. The questions are as follows: the date and reason for coming to France; occupation; if retired, the date of retirement; educational background; family composition; frequency of return visits to the UK; whether they voted in the referendum and their reaction to the result; any inconveniences or changes in their daily life following Brexit; their views on European citizenship; and their sense of belonging.

Analytical framework

Based on the two research questions (RQ1, RQ2), this analysis focused on respondents' sense of belonging and identity following Brexit. It aimed to explore changes in their European identity and citizenship through the following questions:

'Do you still consider yourself European after Brexit?'

'Are you considering acquiring citizenship of an EU Member State after Brexit?'

From the responses to these questions, we first extracted those relating to 'citizenship', 'nationality' and 'sense of belonging/identity' and categorised the respondents' sense of identity as 'European', 'British' or 'French'. Next, we extracted descriptions of the changes they perceived in their citizenship or status due to Brexit.

Overview of the respondents

The respondents ranged in age from 34 to 84 years, with eight individuals aged over sixty. The sample consisted of nine men and six women.

Thirteen of the fifteen respondents were permanent residents of France. One respondent resided in France only for part of the year because of visa restrictions, while another resided only temporarily during visits. Thirteen respondents had worked or were working in France, one had worked in Switzerland, and one in Belgium. Nine respondents had worked or were working for European institutions. Seven respondents were retired.

The sample exhibits five notable characteristics. Firstly, approximately half of the respondents had family members who were citizens of EU Member States. Five had French family or partner, while three had relatives from other EU countries (A Czech, a Portuguese and a Pole). Five respondents were part of British–British couples, and two were not mentioned.

Secondly, 85 per cent of respondents (13 individuals) had worked or were working in France, while 60 per cent (nine individuals) had professional experience within European institutions. Among them were three individuals who had exercised European political rights directly, including one former member of the European Parliament and two former municipal councillors.

Thirdly, the respondents had generally resided in continental Europe for long periods. Their average length of residence exceeded thirty years, ranging from two to fifty-seven years. Approximately 60 per cent had been unable to vote in the 2016 referendum because of the UK's fifteen-year rule for overseas voters. Only one respondent had moved to continental Europe after Brexit.

Fourthly, although respondents were geographically dispersed across France, there was some regional concentration. Seven resided in the Grand Est region including Strasbourg, three in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, two in Île-de-France, one in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, one in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, and one in another European country.

Finally, the sample reflects a degree of social and cultural selectivity. Respondents generally possessed high levels of education, strong political awareness, substantial interest in European affairs, and relatively privileged socio-economic positions. The study therefore does not include individuals in particularly vulnerable social or economic circumstances. Also, issues of racial discrimination are not addressed in this analysis. All respondents identified as White British. Interestingly, two interviewees remarked that while they personally had not experienced discrimination because they were white, they considered some aspects of EU citizenship policies to be discriminatory in principle.

European identity after Brexit

Three principal findings emerged from the analysis. Firstly, responses concerning European identity were highly diverse. Some respondents described themselves as *'French and British'*, while others simply identified as *'European'*. Several characterised themselves as *'a convinced European'*, *'British-European'*, or *'European and British'*. These responses suggest that European identity is not necessarily exclusive. Rather than replacing national identity, it often coexists alongside it. Some respondents simultaneously expressed attachment to both Britain and Europe, while others referred to dual national identities that reflected their legal citizenship status. European identity may therefore be understood as both singular and plural.

Secondly, two broad patterns emerged regarding the characteristics of those expressing different forms of identity. British nationals who had acquired French nationality tended to emphasise their attachment to France. Their narratives frequently linked naturalisation with deeper integration into French society and political life. By contrast, respondents who had retained British nationality while obtaining residence rights in France—or those who had not yet acquired French nationality or permanent residence status—more often

described themselves as both British and European. In these cases, respondents did not perceive European identity as incompatible with British identity despite the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

Thirdly, although the expression of identity differs between these two patterns, both naturalisation and permanent residence status in France function as mechanisms through which British nationals seek to recover the rights previously associated with EU citizenship. This suggests that they were actively reconstructing new forms of citizenship following the loss of EU citizenship as a consequence of Brexit.

The findings therefore suggest that Brexit has not led to the disappearance of European identity among British nationals residing in France. Rather, European identity continues to coexist with national identity and is often reinforced through efforts to regain the legal rights associated with EU citizenship.

Changes in belonging after Brexit: International civil servants and the reconstruction of European citizenship

The second research question examines whether Brexit has altered the sense of belonging and citizenship of British nationals residing in continental Europe.

A particularly significant finding concerns British nationals who have spent much of their professional lives working for European and international institutions. Because many European institutions are located on the continent, a considerable number of British citizens have built careers in organisations dedicated to European integration and international cooperation. Although the UK left the European Union in 2020, British nationals who were already employed by these institutions before Brexit have continued to work for the European Commission and the European Parliament (hereafter referred to as '*the European institutions*').

The present study includes several such individuals and reveals that, paradoxically, some of the strongest supporters of European integration have experienced considerable insecurity following Brexit. Several of the interviewees are or were employed by international organisations. Their professional careers were dedicated to promoting European integration, and they were opposed to or deeply disappointed by Brexit. Some were severely affected by its consequences. To highlight this irony, the following analysis focuses on these international civil servants' perceptions of Europe, sense of identity and residence status.

Former Council of Europe officers

Strasbourg, often described as one of the capitals of Europe, hosts numerous European institutions. Among them, the Council of Europe (CoE), founded in 1949 with the UK as one of its founding members, continues to employ many British nationals despite Brexit because the UK remains a member of the Council of Europe.

Interviews with current and former British employees of the CoE reveal a significant divide between those who retired before Brexit and those whose retirement occurred during or after the transition period.

Respondents who had retired before Brexit had already secured French residence permits and therefore reported relatively little disruption to their lives after the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Interestingly, however, several abandoned earlier plans to apply for French nationality.

One respondent, *A*, former Council of Europe official, who had lived in Strasbourg since 1983, had previously expressed a strong desire to acquire French citizenship because Brexit would deprive him of voting rights both in the UK and in France, when I first interviewed him in 2017. During a follow-up interview conducted on 28 February 2025 in Strasbourg, however, he explained that his priorities had changed: due to old age, his principal concern was now access to healthcare rather than political participation. Because permanent residence status already guaranteed access to French public services, he no longer considered French nationality necessary.

Similarly, another retired CoE official, *B*, who had moved to France in 1967 and has lived in Strasbourg ever since, remarked that he had been '*working throughout my life to achieve greater integration*' (interview conducted in Strasbourg on 12 March 2025). For him, Brexit was '*a disaster, of course*'. He explained that permanent residence status enabled him to maintain his existing lifestyle and that he was now too old to justify the additional administrative burden associated with naturalisation in order to recover EU citizenship.

Both former European officers described themselves as '*British and European*'. Having worked for European integration throughout their careers, they continued to regard Europe as an important component of their identity despite no longer holding EU citizenship.

Their decisions not to pursue EU citizenship through naturalisation in an EU Member State should not therefore be interpreted as a rejection of Europe. Rather, they reflect a pragmatic assessment that, at their stage of life, the benefits of acquiring French nationality in order to remain in France no longer outweigh the additional administrative burden. British nationality remains sufficient for travel to the UK, whilst advancing age has reduced the practical importance of freedom of movement elsewhere in Europe. Their decisions therefore illustrate that legal citizenship and European identity do not necessarily develop in parallel.

Administrative exclusion and post-retirement insecurity

The experiences of younger former international civil servants present a markedly different picture. *C*, who moved to Strasbourg in 1990 to work for the CoE, was an international civil servant when we met him in 2017. Although he was not eligible to vote in the Brexit referendum, he told us that Brexit would have no particular impact on him. However, he faced significant difficulties after his retirement. While employed by

the Council, his legal status in France was governed by a special residence regime issued through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rather than by ordinary immigration procedures. During the transition period, under the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement—which grants British nationals already residing in EU Member States the right to continue living there upon application—he attempted to apply for residence rights. However, local authority (*préfet*) informed him that the CoE’s employees were not eligible to apply for standard residence permits while employed and advised him to wait until retirement. Consequently, when he applied again after retiring, he was informed that his previous status excluded him from protection under the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement.

As a result, despite having lived in Strasbourg for more than thirty years and having no intention of returning permanently to the UK, *C* found himself trapped in an administrative limbo. Although he has repeatedly demonstrated long-term residence in France and obtained temporary extensions, he continues to await a definitive decision regarding his legal status. As he explained: *‘And now, I’m waiting. It’s a long process because I don’t think I fit the typical criteria anymore.’* (interview on 14 March 2025 in Strasbourg)

The consequences extend beyond administrative exclusion. Now that the UK has left the EU, *C*, a British national without a residence permit, risks being unable to return to his home in France if he travels abroad. Ironically, a person who devoted much of his professional life promoting European integration now faces uncertainty regarding his right to remain in Europe. Despite these difficulties in his life in France, *C* continues to identify as both English and European. Brexit has not altered his sense of belonging. Instead, it has transformed the legal conditions under which that identity can be realised.

European institution official: Importance of family-based EU citizenship

A similar pattern emerged in the case of *D* (interview online on 11 November 2024), who retired from the European institution in 2022. After leaving the UK in 1988, *D* lived and worked in Poland before democratisation. Following Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004, his language skills led to recruitment by the European institution. Upon retirement, he applied for residence rights in Belgium, where he had been living. Like *C*, he was informed that his status as an international civil servant excluded him from protection under the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement. Faced with legal uncertainty, *D* reconsidered his retirement plans. Rather than remaining in Brussels, he purchased a house in southern France and relocated there in 2022. However, after discovering the complexity and length of French residence procedures, he chose a different strategy: Because his wife is Polish, he applied for residence rights in Poland instead.

His case highlights the growing importance of family ties to EU citizens in the post-Brexit environment. Through his wife’s nationality, *D* gained access to a legal pathway that enabled him to reconstruct rights associated with European citizenship. Nevertheless, *D* does not identify with Poland. He continues to describe himself as both British and European. He explicitly distinguished legal status from cultural belonging, explaining that

Poland's social and cultural environment felt less familiar to him than France. In other words, the citizenship rights he seeks are not necessarily linked to the places with which he feels the strongest emotional attachment.

This finding reveals an important tension between legal status and identity. While citizenship is often assumed to reflect belonging, Brexit has encouraged some individuals to pursue citizenship or residence rights primarily as pragmatic strategies for maintaining mobility and security.

Like *A* and *B* mentioned earlier, *D* is able to live securely with a residence permit for an EU country. So, what sort of British people needs citizenship of an EU country?

Current European civil servant and naturalisation

A Council of Europe (CoE) official, *E*, who moved to France in 1988, stated during our interview in March 2017 that he was applying for French nationality through his wife. Then, he had acquired French nationality in 2020. Asked why, *E* replied:

It was more of a question of stability for the future. (...) If I didn't become French, then at the point of retirement, I would have to get a French residence card and that would be more difficult after Brexit. Even though there's a special card for people who were living here before Brexit, I wouldn't have had one of those because we have a different card when we are international civil servants' (interviewed on 21 June 2024 in Strasbourg).

To avoid the same experience as *C*, *E* applied for French nationality through his wife. It should be noted that, like *D*, he is seeking a family-based pathway to EU citizenship linked to the nationality of an EU member state, rather than the nationality of the country in which he continues to reside.

Cross-border workers and the search for EU citizenship

The experience of *F* demonstrates how Brexit has affected British nationals whose professional lives depend upon cross-border mobility. She resides in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes but works for an international non-governmental organisation located in Geneva, Switzerland. Prior to Brexit, EU citizenship facilitated free movement between Switzerland and EU Member States. Following the UK's withdrawal, British nationals lost automatic access to these arrangements.

Although the agreement between the UK and Switzerland on citizens' rights following the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the free movement of persons agreement signed in 2019 protects certain categories of workers, obtaining the necessary permits became substantially more difficult. Swiss employers must now demonstrate that no EU citizen is available to fill a position before hiring a British national, creating additional administrative and financial burdens. As *F* explained:

My office needs to prove to the Swiss authorities that nobody else in Europe who applied for the job can do this job. It's a complicated process for my office to do. It's expensive' (interview

online, on 15 July 2024).

F further noted that if she were to lose her current position, obtaining similar employment in the future would be significantly more difficult because she no longer enjoys the rights associated with EU citizenship.

Although she successfully obtained a French residence permit under the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement and later secured Swiss work authorisation, the experience increased her sense of vulnerability. Consequently, she had begun the process of applying for Irish citizenship, several weeks before our interview. Why did she choose Irish nationality rather than that of her French partner? She explained as follows:

‘Because we know the process takes time, two years minimum in our region, because of course, in our region of France, there are many “frontaliers”, there are many British people who have been living in France for more than five years who are applying’ (interview online, on 15 July 2024).

Moreover, her motivation was not based on Irish national identity. Rather, the application represented a pragmatic strategy for recovering rights lost through Brexit. Because her grandmother had been born in Ireland, she was eligible for Irish citizenship by descent. Observing her mother’s successful naturalisation encouraged her to pursue the same route. As she explained: *I do start to feel less secure’.*

F’s case illustrates particularly clearly how citizenship can become detached from subjective belonging. Although she continues to describe herself as British, international and European, she seeks Irish citizenship primarily as a means of restoring freedom of movement and securing future employment opportunities.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that Brexit has encouraged British nationals to distinguish between legal citizenship as a means of securing rights and European identity as a continuing sense of belonging.

Discussion

Based on the interviews with current and former employees of European and international organisations, three principal findings emerge.

British–European identity unchanged

Firstly, these findings demonstrate that Brexit has not fundamentally transformed the identities of British nationals who have devoted their professional lives to European and international organisations. The loss of EU citizenship has not led to the disappearance of European identity among them. Although they no longer possess EU citizenship, many continue to identify as European. Their European identity coexists with their

British national identity, as illustrated by respondents such as *A* and *B*, who consistently described themselves as ‘*British and European*’. These findings demonstrate that Brexit has not fundamentally altered their sense of belonging to Europe.

Without EU citizenship, these British nationals continue to regard themselves as Europeans. These findings may be interpreted as the reverse of Yanasmayan’s argument, which distinguishes between the legal and emotional dimensions of citizenship. Whereas Yanasmayan argues that individuals may acquire dual nationality without developing an emotional attachment to the state concerned in order to secure legal rights, the respondents in this study retained a strong sense of European belonging despite losing the legal status of EU citizenship.

Thus, what has changed is not their identity but their legal security in Europe. For many respondents, Brexit created new administrative barriers that challenged their ability to live, work, and move freely across Europe, generating uncertainty about their ability to continue their previous way of life. Faced with this uncertainty, many applied for residence permits under the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement as an alternative legal means of restoring legal security, since British nationals residing in France were entitled to apply for residence permits during the transition period in order to preserve the residence rights guaranteed under that Agreement.

Are the British European officers undeserving of the privilege of staying put?

However, this study also demonstrates that British officers working for European institutions were unable to change their residence status during the transition period because they already held a special residence status as international civil servants. Consequently, *C* and *D* were unable to regularise their residence status upon retirement. According to *E*, this situation could affect anyone who had been employed by an international organisation since before the transition period and who intended to continue living in an EU Member State after leaving their post.

Thus, despite having devoted their professional lives to European integration, these international civil servants—who might reasonably be regarded as exemplary Europeans—found themselves excluded from the legal protections designed to preserve existing rights after Brexit. Their ability to continue residing in Europe now finds itself under threat. In response to Benson’s argument that Brexit has created a new distinction between those who are ‘*deserving*’ and ‘*undeserving*’ of ‘*the privilege of staying put*’, an important question arises: should these individuals also be regarded as undeserving? Paradoxically, it is precisely those who contributed most directly to European integration who now find themselves facing the greatest legal uncertainty as a consequence of the decision taken by their country of nationality.

Reconstructing citizenship among British living in Europe

The findings further demonstrate that, even in such cases, as illustrated by the cases of *D* and *E*, respondents whose spouses were EU citizens could avoid this risk by applying for a residence permit or naturalisation on the basis of their family ties. Similarly, as illustrated by the case of *F*, some respondents sought citizenship of an EU Member State that was their ancestor's country of origin, despite having never lived there.

In this way, obtaining residence rights or naturalisation through family ties or ancestral links has become a means of reconstructing the legal rights formerly associated with EU citizenship. These findings support previous arguments that European identity is compatible with multiple and overlapping forms of belonging, rather than being exclusive or territorially bounded.

Furthermore, respondents who considered residence rights to be insufficient sought naturalisation. By contrast, a few respondents, such as *A* and *B*, changed their views as they grew older and came to regard residence rights as sufficient. Since most European countries recognise dual nationality, acquiring the citizenship of an EU Member State represents a form of compensatory citizenship that has acquired particular value for British nationals following Brexit. Moreover, as illustrated by the case of *F*, the relative ease of the application process also influenced respondents' decisions. These findings indicate that strategic citizenship practices have become increasingly evident among British nationals living in Europe.

Cases such as *D*, who obtained residence rights through his wife's nationality while expressing little sense of belonging to that country, and *F*, who acquired citizenship by descent despite having no intention of residing there, may be understood as examples of Yanasmayan's '*thin sense of citizenship*'. In *F*'s case, such citizenship can be regarded as a non-territorial legal status. As Joppke (2018) argues in relation to external citizenship, granting citizenship without a residence requirement raises questions concerning the absence of a '*genuine link*' with the state concerned. Furthermore, whilst ancestral citizenship reflects states' efforts to maintain ties with their diasporas, for many applicants it primarily functions as a means of securing mobility within the EU (Blanchard, 2025).

These strategies for mitigating legal insecurity include not only the conventional route of obtaining permanent residence under the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement, but also securing residence rights or citizenship through family ties or ancestral links to an EU Member State. Accordingly, Brexit did not simply result in the loss of EU citizenship; it also generated a new process through which British nationals sought to reconstruct the legal rights formerly associated with EU citizenship in order to preserve their lives in Europe. In this respect, the concept of reconstructing citizenship provides a useful analytical framework for understanding British nationals' responses to Brexit.

Rather than passively accepting the consequences of Brexit, many British nationals have actively sought to reconstruct forms of legal membership that enable them to remain and work within a European space. Taken together, these findings suggest that reconstructing

citizenship is not simply a legal response to Brexit but also a strategic process through which British nationals seek to restore rights while maintaining a continuing sense of European belonging.

On family reunification as a fundamental right of EU citizenship

Under Article 21 of TFEU, EU citizenship guarantees freedom of movement and residence, while Directive 2004/38/EC extends these rights to qualifying family members. Although this Directive establishes family reunification as a fundamental right of EU citizens, its application to third-country nationals has historically been less clear. Since the *Zambrano* judgment, however, there has been a discernible trend towards extending the scope of family reunification to include certain categories of third-country nationals (Bouveresse, 2020, pp. 92–93). Against this background, an important question arises: to what extent does this fundamental right continue to protect British nationals following Brexit?

In *D*'s case, as the family member of an EU citizen, he appears to retain the right to family reunification and is therefore entitled to continue residing in France. However, the situation is more complex for British couples who have become third-country nationals. Although their residence rights remain protected so long as they continue living in their country of residence, it remains uncertain whether equivalent protection would apply if they were to relocate to another country (Bouveresse, 2020, p. 92–93). Consequently, all of the British couples interviewed were careful to ensure that their stays outside France did not exceed the permitted 90-day period.

Family ties with citizens of EU Member States therefore broaden the opportunities for British nationals to remain within the EU. Nevertheless, even when respondents continue to regard themselves as Europeans, regaining EU citizenship is often neither straightforward nor automatic. For this reason, many have strategically reconstructed their citizenship status through family ties or other legal pathways. However, the legal status acquired through such strategies does not necessarily imply a corresponding sense of belonging to the Member State whose nationality has been acquired. Rather, these legal arrangements function primarily as mechanisms for preserving rights of residence and mobility within Europe, while European identity itself continues to be directed towards Europe as a whole rather than towards any single nation-state.

Conclusion

This article has examined the impact of Brexit on the lives, citizenship status, and European identity of British nationals who continue to reside in EU Member States, focusing in particular on British nationals living in France who have worked for European and international organisations. Through a phenomenological qualitative analysis of interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025, this study found that British international civil servants retained a strong sense of European identity even after losing EU citizenship

and that many were unable to obtain residence rights under the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement upon retirement. Ironically, those who devoted their professional lives to European integration found themselves unable to continue living securely in Europe because of decisions taken by their country of nationality—a country in whose referendum many of them were not even entitled to vote.

To respond to this legal insecurity, many respondents strategically reconstructed their citizenship through family ties, ancestry, residence rights, or naturalisation in EU Member States. Although these legal strategies were often motivated by a continuing sense of European identity, they did not necessarily imply a corresponding sense of belonging to the Member State whose nationality was acquired.

This study therefore argues that Brexit has generated a new process of reconstructing citizenship, through which British nationals seek to recover the legal rights formerly associated with EU citizenship while maintaining a continuing sense of European belonging.

The findings concerning the legal status of former international civil servants and the reconstruction of citizenship are particularly relevant for EU Member States such as France and Belgium, where dual nationality is recognised but where complex administrative procedures continue to shape access to residence rights and naturalisation.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that, although Brexit has fundamentally altered the legal foundations of EU citizenship, it has not necessarily diminished European identity. Instead, it has encouraged British nationals to reconstruct legal forms of membership while maintaining a continuing sense of belonging to Europe.

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AI Statement

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist with English language editing, including improvements to grammar, style, clarity, and academic expression. All aspects of the research, including the study design, theoretical framework, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and conclusions, were conducted by the author. The author reviewed and verified all AI-assisted revisions and takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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Cross-border dimensions of peace-building: European experiences and the future of Gaza, Israel, and neighbouring countries

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Abstract

Borders are not simply lines of separation, but rather dynamic spaces of interaction, making them central both to conflict and to peacebuilding. Building on this premise, this paper examines the Anthedon initiative and its flagship report “Gaza: A Vision of Hope” (2025), which proposes a vision for the reconstruction of Gaza within a broader regional framework involving Palestine, Israel, Egypt, and neighbouring countries. Developed by a multidisciplinary team of experts from Heritopolis, UN-Habitat, and diverse backgrounds, the initiative places cultural and natural heritage, urban renewal, economic connectivity, climate resilience, and cross-border governance at the core of a transformative agenda for recovery and reconciliation. It is precisely these cross-border aspects that will be explored throughout the paper. The article first revisits the content and context of the Anthedon initiative and the Vision of Hope report, and highlights the relevance of European experiences in cross-border cooperation as a valuable reference for the region. The paper then synthesises the current context in Gaza and key scenarios for future trajectories for Palestine and Israel, emphasising their spatial, political, and societal implications. Finally, it develops a detailed analysis of cross-border components embedded in these scenarios, structured around a multi-level governance framework and articulated through six dimensions of cross-border integration aimed at fostering cooperation, trust-building, and peace. By bridging scenario building in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with insights pulled from the experience of European integration, the paper argues that cross-border approaches offer a productive lens through which to reimagine post-conflict futures in Gaza and its wider regional environment.

Keywords: Integration, peace-building, cross-border cooperation, European Union, Gaza, Israel, Middle East, conflict resolution

Figure 1: Map of projected connectivity of peace and cooperation in the region, based on urban modelling



Extracted from the "Gaza: A Vision of Hope" (Anthedon Initiative, 2025, p. 4)

Introduction

Borders have long been at the heart of conflict. However, rather than fixed lines, walls, or fences, they are evolving spaces, making them equally central for peace. This consideration lays an important foundation for Anthedon, an international initiative dedicated to a shared future between Palestine, Israel, and their neighbours. Anthedon proposes a comprehensive path to recovery for Gaza, with a focus on cultural and natural heritage, urban renewal, economic connectivity and climate resilience, aiming to foster reconciliation and lasting peace through cross-border dialogue, empathy, and cooperation throughout the region.

As part of a multidisciplinary team taking part in the initiative, experts from Heritopolis (Heritopolis, n.d.), UN-Habitat, and professionals from various backgrounds published a report, "Gaza: A Vision of Hope" (Anthedon Initiative, 2025), in 2025. Heritopolis's work addresses the role of cultural and natural heritage in the metropolis and its contribution to

spatial sustainability. Building upon this approach, "Gaza: A Vision of Hope" started as an exploration of ideas for regional cooperation based on the understanding of cross-border metropolises, with steps towards a "two-state solution" between Israel and Palestine. The report examines different scenarios for the future of this region, which is marked by deep divisions and, especially in recent years, by unprecedented violence. Implying that the reconstruction of Gaza within its current limits is unsustainable, a specific hypothesis of the report is to imagine the reconstruction of Gaza in the context of its integration into a region connected with Israel, Egypt and neighbouring countries, thus implying the development of multi-level cross-border governance. It is in this scope that the Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière, n.d.), an expert in this subject in European contexts, became involved in the project, in particular to draft the chapter "Metropolitan Governance" (Anthedon Initiative, 2025, p. 54–59).

The present contribution to the ABCD Journal recalls the extreme context in which the aforementioned report was prepared and draws on European experiences in imagining a Vision of Hope for Gaza. It describes in a synthetic way various scenarios for Palestine and their implications for Israel, developed by experts, and presents in more depth the cross-border components of these scenarios, within a multi-level governance framework, according to six dimensions of cross-border integration aimed at building peace among the territories concerned.

"Gaza: A Vision of Hope": The context of the Anthedon initiative and the pertinence of European experiences

The Anthedon Initiative and the Vision of Hope report

The Anthedon initiative is an international effort aimed at fostering a sustainable and inclusive recovery strategy for Gaza, developed under the auspices of Heritopolis - Heritage and the Metropolis, a UN-Habitat University Network Initiative global research consortium linking heritage and metropolitan issues. Grounded in a long-term vision for the region, the initiative reimagines Gaza as an open and interconnected metropolis, supported by resilient infrastructure, advanced urban services, and a climate-adaptive economy. As noted in the Gaza Compendium, while, over the past decade 13 Spatial Plans and 18 Strategic Proposals have been prepared for Gaza with two overview reports (Anthedon Initiative, 2026), the Anthedon Initiative presents a fundamentally different vision for the reconstruction of Gaza that places people, memory, and social cohesion at the centre of recovery. Rather than treating reconstruction as a technical exercise focused solely on infrastructure, housing, and spatial planning, it argues that lasting recovery requires rebuilding a social fabric that has been systematically eroded by decades of occupation, blockade, political fragmentation, and repeated cycles of destruction. Central to this approach are the core concepts of Heritopolis, which emphasise culture, heritage, and interpersonal connections as key drivers of reconstruction. Complementing this framework, the Anthedon Initiative promotes cross-border cooperation and cross-cultural

dialogue to revitalise civic identity, strengthen social cohesion, and restore Gaza's historical role as a regional hub. The Greek name "Anthedon" itself refers to the ancient port of Gaza, a gateway to the Mediterranean, which for over a millennium served as a strategic hub of cultural and commercial exchange, as a crossroad along the Incense Route and the Via Maris, connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe (Anthedon Initiative, 2025, p. 4). Drawing on this legacy, the initiative proposes to reintegrate Gaza into transnational networks linking Palestine with neighbouring countries through trade, environmental cooperation, and cultural restoration. Rather than focusing solely on the rebuilding of Gaza, Anthedon aims to reposition it as a key actor in the regional economic, social, and political landscape. The dynamic role of cross-border dimensions is central in better understanding this future trajectory. As the region faces the potential to emerge from trauma and conflict, as the EU emerged from World War II, functioning cohesively alongside neighbouring countries becomes essential for peace-building, while a failure to do so would threaten the well-being of all.

As these lines are written, a ceasefire is supposedly established in Gaza, but violence persists. In the context of the current paper, as well as the Vision of Hope report, scenarios for peace are based on the assumption that a ceasefire is effective. Another strong hypothesis of these scenarios, at least the most advanced, is the "two-state solution" in its many forms, as well as the possibility of establishing a multi-level functional governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Peyrony, 2020) model of a common territory, including Palestinian and Israeli components. The latter is clearly beyond the traditional Westphalian perspective of sovereign States contained within linear borders. Today, the main source of inspiration of such an approach lies in the post-1945 European integration process and a reflection on the phases and levels of interactions. This contribution thus focuses on the European experience, drawing pertinent parallels while also acknowledging differences compared to the geopolitical, socio-economic, and cultural contexts of the Middle East.

The functional relevance of the European experience

The reference to Europe here is fruitful firstly for functional reasons. The European process is based on the existence of Nation States as strong foundational units for the progressive establishment of an overarching entity, the European Union. Kahn (2014) proposed to consider the EU as *"mutualisation of sovereignty in a supranational state which is an association of sovereign nation states"*. According to him, the sacralisation of national sovereignty led to the two World Wars of 20th century. EU integration is based on the mutualisation of a shared territory and thus the desacralisation of borders. In this context, national territories are mutualised into a single European territory, further reinforced by Europeanised policies, such as single currency or free movement. Europe has also contributed to the emergence of cross-border "Euroregions", supported by, inter alia, Interreg, a series of EU funding programmes that support cooperation (Wassenberg et al. 2015).

In this logic, and contradicting a nationalist prism that considers countries as monads, territorial boxes that can be either opened or closed, coined by Faludi (2018) as “territorialism”, territoriality has become post-nationalist and post-bellicist. Kahn refers to the example of peace in Ulster, made possible by the Good Friday agreement – even after Brexit. The Franco-German example, which will be elaborated on further in the following paragraphs, involves the additional, supranational level of the European Union which encourages and facilitates cross-border cooperation - free movement within the EU Single market, and EU cohesion policy funding, including Interreg programmes. While this does not exist around Gaza, it could be an inspiration for a similar “umbrella” framework including Egypt, Israel and the region.

The Franco-German Example and European Integration

The evolution of borders has been particularly evident in the history of the European Union after World War II. To exemplify such changes, it is worth turning specifically to the Franco-German border, a territory that was subject to multiple changes in rule even before the beginning of WWII, with Alsace-Lorraine switching between French and German jurisdiction on various occasions throughout history (Wassenberg et al. 2015; Wassenberg & Reitel, 2020). It is worth noting that this territory was also a physical clashing point during both of the World Wars. In the aftermath of WWII, a heavy death toll, including civilian casualties, as well as general trauma linked to annexation and the lived experience of the bloodiest conflicts in human history, left France and Germany deeply divided. Hatred and fear ran high, specifically a fear of another war.

Territorial instability and the question of borders presented an additional challenge. Although national borders in Western Europe remained largely unchanged after 1945, one important exception concerned the Saarland. Its economic and strategic significance, largely due to its rich coal reserves, made the Saar a long-contested territory between France and Germany. Following the war, the area was occupied by France and eventually became the Saar Protectorate, thus separating it politically from Germany for various years, until the territory was reincorporated into Germany in 1957, following the outcome of the 1955 Saar Statute referendum (Schön, 2022). More generally, the German territory continued experiencing changes in the following years, notably the division between East and West Germany, which reflected a political fragmentation that, despite not directly reshaping the Franco-German border, created a difficult and continuously changing context for decision makers. It was in this complex and particularly sensitive environment, heightened by fear and animosity following the war, that German and French leaders made the revolutionary decision to collaborate.

This move was supported in a broader context by the Marshall Plan, which aimed to revitalise post-war Europe through strategic investment, infrastructure rebuilding, and economic integration. An important step towards such integration was the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, which pooled strategic industries under a supranational High Authority with equal representation, ensuring that another

war would be, in the words of the 1950 Schuman Declaration, “*not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible*” (Schuman, 1950). This cooperation deepened with the European Economic Community (EEC), which established a common market by removing trade barriers and adopting a common external trade policy.

Later initiatives such as the Schengen Agreement in 1985 enabled the free movement of people, strengthening everyday cross-border ties. As integration deepened and ties between countries strengthened, the European Union emerged with the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s, marking a shift toward broader political, social, and economic union. Programmes like Interreg further enhanced regional cooperation, while the introduction of the Euro marked an important step in socio-economic integration among participating countries.

In parallel, Franco-German reconciliation was solidified by the Élysée Treaty in 1963, fostering lasting cultural and youth exchanges, and more recently, the 2019 Aachen Treaty reinforced this partnership through practical mechanisms such as the Cross-Border Cooperation Committee, tasked with identifying priorities, addressing local challenges, and proposing solutions in border regions (Peyrony, 2021). This institutionalised Franco-German model has not only remained central to European integration but has also inspired similar bilateral frameworks elsewhere, such as the Quirinal Treaty between France and Italy, demonstrating how their cooperation set a precedent for broader European collaboration.

This non-exhaustive series of events, implemented over a period of over half a century, all contributed to a deepened integration between European countries, and a reflection on the sequence of cooperation may shed light on applying these experiences in other situations. This integration was not only on economic and practical bases, but also on personal levels, as interactions between citizens was facilitated and a common European citizenship was formalised through the introduction of EU passports and common EU rights. By opening borders, border territories gained the possibility to become cross-border living areas - acknowledged as “cross border regions” in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Peyrony, 2024) - rather than being divided along national lines, thus strengthening unification and diminishing divisions. While national identities and languages remain and are celebrated within the EU, as echoed in the motto “*united in diversity*” (European Union, n.d.), the villainisation of the other between citizens of member states, beyond sport, has largely been mitigated, making the EU, despite criticisms and challenges, successful in assuring peace between member countries since its founding. Save for Brexit, no country has expressed the wish to leave the EU (Kahn, 2026).

It is worth noting that the European Union, despite its commendable achievements in bringing countries and people together, is far from flawless and, in a certain light, far from fully integrated. Health crises, migratory pressures, an unprecedented reintroduction of border controls that threaten supranational unity, and war at its external borders, have put the EU system under stress, and even challenged the ambition for peace that brought the Union into being. Born in a culturally specific context, existing in a time of polycrises,

and evolving to fit ever-changing needs, the EU is unique in the world. While not a model that is directly replicable, different elements of the European Union, drawn from its foundations and more specifically the cooperation at its internal borders, can serve as helpful inspiration for peace-building. The pertinence of the EU as an example is thus based on possible lessons learned from integration that must be adapted to local realities, but also the broader understanding that such severe conflicts and crises require new and innovative solutions, starting with frameworks for cooperation. Notably, it is important to recognise the fragility, not only on a socio-psychological level but also on a political and territorial level, in which the construction of the European Union began. The process of integration and subsequent peace is not necessarily linear and has been unfolding gradually in the EU over decades. While it is difficult to predict the trajectory of territories in different contexts, coordination between states serves as a foundation for progress. The shared recognition and respect of borders and sovereignty, which constitute a current challenge between Palestine and Israel, serve as important first steps in the development of a common future and long-lasting peace.

Historical relevance: Links between the EU, Israel, and Palestine

Another reason to connect the European approach to the search of a solution for a peaceful future for Israel and Palestine is of historical nature. Albeit with pitfalls, Europe, Israel, and Palestine have had a shared destiny, especially in the 20th century. Beyond the historic connections to the Holy Land, the 1916 Sykes–Picot Agreement between the United Kingdom and France, defined their mutually agreed spheres of influence in an eventual partition of the Ottoman Empire, was the basis for the 1918 Anglo–French Modus Vivendi. This new colonialism, divide et impera, became a bone of contention for Arab nationalism. Moreover, Israel’s history has its origins in Europe with Zionism as a European ideology aiming to answer a European problem: antisemitism and resulting pogroms, rife since the 19th century. The mutual acknowledgement between European nations could only occur after the end of the Second World War: France and Germany were successively defeated, and the intra-European crime of the Shoah obliged each State to face its responsibilities. In Europe before 1945, according to Karsenti (2024), national pride always turned into deadly rivalry, while following the end of World War II, individual national pride could only happen through belonging to Europe, preventing such failure from repeating itself.

To better understand such connections and how these links can be used productively to imagine a post-conflict future, it is essential to unpack the current context in the region shared by Israel and Palestine.

Current day Gaza and Scenarios for Palestine and mirrored in Israel

Current Context in Gaza

The conflict between Palestine and Israel has deep historical roots shaped by territorial disputes, political instability, and competing national narratives. These longstanding tensions were violently brought back to global attention following the Hamas-led attack on October 7th, 2023, which triggered a devastating escalation in Gaza and intensified an already severe humanitarian crisis. While the recent violence marks a critical turning point, the conditions underlying the conflict had been deteriorating for decades, making Gaza politically isolated, economically fragile, and socially fragmented.

It is important to note that Gaza's humanitarian crisis predates the events of October 2023. Even before the recent escalation, the territory faced extreme socio-economic hardship. Unemployment rates had reached approximately 53%, while nearly half of the population lived on less than \$5.50 per day (Anthedon Initiative, 2025, p. 61). Access to basic necessities such as safe drinking water, reliable electricity, and adequate healthcare services was critically limited. These conditions developed largely within the context of a 18-year Israeli blockade, and subsequent Egyptian blockade, imposed after Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, and despite Israel's withdrawal of settlers in 2005 from the Gaza Strip. This was also aggravated by the Israeli policy to sever Palestinian ties between Gaza and the West Bank. The blockade has been widely criticised by humanitarian organisations as a form of collective punishment due to its severe restrictions on movement, trade, and access to essential goods. By 2014, nearly 80% of Gaza's population was living below the poverty line, while the territory faced a housing shortage estimated at 71,000 units (Anthedon Initiative, 2025, p. 61). The cumulative effects of economic deprivation, infrastructural decline, and political isolation created a highly vulnerable environment long before the latest outbreak of violence.

While Gaza, with its human capital, strategic location and legacy as a hub for trade and cultural exchanges, has great potential for integration into wider transnational networks linking Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and neighbouring regions, the ongoing conflict has severely undermined these possibilities and the hopes re-establishing such connections. The latest escalation following October 7th has caused unprecedented destruction across Gaza, including widespread damage to housing, infrastructure, healthcare systems, educational institutions, and cultural sites. Large segments of the population have been displaced, deepening insecurity and exacerbating existing social divisions. Restricted mobility and limited access to external markets continue to isolate Gaza from regional and global economic systems, impeding both immediate recovery and long-term development. Beyond physical reconstruction, meaningful recovery also depends on overcoming the psychological consequences of prolonged violence, including fear, mistrust, hatred, and social fragmentation, all of which have been significantly

heightened both in Israel and in Palestine and pose major obstacles to reconciliation and cross-border cooperation. The extent of the damage caused and underway is difficult to estimate, demonstrating the urgency of a Vision of Hope.

In this context, the future of Gaza cannot be understood solely through the lens of conflict and destruction. Its historical role as a centre of connectivity and exchange offers an alternative framework for reconstruction and regional integration. Re-establishing these connections through trade agreements, shared economic corridors, environmental cooperation, and the restoration of cultural and natural heritage could contribute significantly to regional stability, economic revitalisation, and mutual interdependence. Addressing the current crisis requires not only rebuilding physical infrastructure, but also fostering political cooperation, economic inclusion, and social reconciliation across borders. Sustainable recovery will depend on restoring Gaza's ability to participate in broader regional systems while creating conditions that support security, dignity, and long-term stability for both Palestinians, Egyptians and Israelis.

Present and Future: Scenarios for Israel and Palestine

The possible futures of Palestine and Israel can be better understood through a series of interconnected scenarios that explore different political, social, and humanitarian trajectories emerging from the current crisis. Rather than predicting a single future, scenario building analyses present realities and identifies key forces to create a set of coherent and contrasting narratives that allow decision-makers, communities, and institutions to reflect on strategic choices, anticipate risks, and identify opportunities for action under different conditions. These scenarios are not simply isolated possibilities, rather, they may represent successive stages in a broader process that could move Gaza and the wider region from devastation and instability toward reconstruction, coexistence, or further fragmentation. While these scenarios are explored in depth in the Vision of Hope report (Anthedon Initiative, 2025, p. 13-21), the following sections summarise the key takeaways. By examining these pathways and sequences, it becomes possible to better understand the challenges, risks, and opportunities that may shape the future of both Palestinians and Israelis.

The Anthedon initiative involved a Palestinian scenario-building process as part of the Vision of Hope. The goal was not to design governmental or security regimes, as these are matters to be negotiated and agreed upon by Palestinians and Israelis through a political process, but rather to explore alternatives, identify opportunities, and examine societal foundations for sustainable peace, all through a bottom-up approach. It was designed as a fully participatory and locally owned methodology that centred Palestinian voices and leadership from Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, that engaged approximately 120 people representing a broad cross-section of Palestinian society. The process combined rigorous evidence-based research with an inclusive participatory methodology. It began with a series of thematic background papers prepared by experts covering governance, demographics, spatial and territorial planning, economic development, education, regional

dynamics, and the history of the peace process. These studies informed a series of full-day in-person workshops, complemented by online sessions, during which participants identified key driving forces, critical uncertainties, megatrends, and potential game changers shaping Palestine's future. Between July 2024 and April 2025, seventy-six participants representing civil society organisations, women's groups, youth, local leadership, professionals, and private sector actors contributed to shaping the scenarios. The process was further strengthened through targeted interviews with experts and key stakeholders, and the resulting scenarios were refined through successive rounds of consultation and feedback. This iterative approach ensured that the final scenarios reflected lived Palestinian realities, aspirations, and concerns rather than externally imposed visions, while remaining responsive to the rapidly evolving political, social, and economic context.

In the Vision of Hope Report, the five Palestinian scenarios resulting from this exercise (End of National Aspiration, Status Quo, Ribat, Neo-Oslo, and One Palestine) were mirrored with five Israeli scenarios (Apartheid, Israel as an Island, Israel 100, Oslo C, and the Two-State Solution). However, it is important to distinguish between the methodologies underpinning the Palestinian and Israeli scenarios. The Palestinian scenarios emerged from a structured, participatory, and locally led scenario-building process involving a broad cross-section of Palestinian stakeholders. By contrast, the Israeli mirror scenarios were not developed through an equivalent participatory exercise involving Israeli stakeholders. Rather, they represent an analytical interpretation prepared by the Anthedon team to facilitate comparative analysis and explore the interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian futures. While a future participatory scenario-building process with Israeli stakeholders would strengthen the analytical robustness of the mirrored framework, the present approach provides valuable perspectives on future trajectories for the region. Together, these paired futures illustrate how developments on one side directly shape political and social outcomes on the other, with the need to prevent mismatch and synchronise the ambitions over time.

End of National Aspiration / Apartheid

The most catastrophic Palestinian scenario, "End of National Aspiration," envisions the collapse of the Palestinian national movement through mass displacement, destruction of governance structures, annexation, and fragmentation. Israeli military operations render large areas of Gaza and the West Bank uninhabitable, while reconstruction is actively prevented. Palestinians are displaced from Gaza, East Jerusalem, and major areas of the West Bank, producing conditions described as a new Nakba. With both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas discredited and incapable of governance or resistance, Palestinian society fragments into localised struggles for survival and identity. Traditional tribal and religious structures replace national institutions amid chaos, extremism, and social breakdown. International disengagement compounds the crisis, leaving Palestinians facing existential catastrophe without meaningful external support.

The corresponding Israeli scenario, “Apartheid”, describes a de facto one-state reality in which Palestinian national aspirations are eliminated through displacement, military force, and demographic control. Although Israel achieves overwhelming territorial and military dominance, it becomes increasingly isolated internationally and widely condemned as an apartheid-like state. Internal moral divisions deepen within Israeli and global Jewish communities, while displaced Palestinian populations continue demanding return and recognition. Despite short-term military control, Israel remains trapped in perpetual instability, lacking legitimacy, peace, or a sustainable political future.

Status Quo / Israel as an Island

The “Status Quo” scenario represents the continuation of current conditions. Gaza remains devastated by war, displacement, and humanitarian collapse, while reconstruction occurs through fragmented grassroots initiatives under ongoing conflict. Palestinians rebuild shelters from salvaged materials amidst widespread destruction, insecurity, and the constant threat of renewed violence. In the West Bank, de facto annexation accelerates through settlement expansion, home demolitions, military operations, and settler violence, which contribute to a climate of intimidation and insecurity. East Jerusalem experiences heightened tensions and increased settlement activity while the Palestinian Authority faces political irrelevance and financial collapse.

The corresponding Israeli scenario, “Israel as an Island,” depicts a society increasingly shaped by militarisation, fear, and isolation following the trauma of repeated violence. Israel invests heavily in surveillance, border fortification, and security technologies while abandoning hopes for peace. Right-wing political rhetoric and policies reinforce a worldview centred on military control and national survival. Internationally, Israel faces growing diplomatic isolation and criticism due to humanitarian conditions in Gaza and the West Bank. In this future, Israel functions as a heavily fortified regional stronghold, constantly defending itself from perceived external and internal threats while struggling with deep moral and political tensions.

Ribat / Israel 100

The “Ribat” scenario is centred on collective resilience, steadfastness, and community-driven survival in the absence of political breakthroughs. Ribat, understood as both physical and spiritual resistance, emphasises Palestinians’ refusal to abandon their land despite destruction, blockade, and displacement pressures. Across Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, grassroots initiatives replace weakened political leadership, with communities rebuilding homes, restoring daily life, cultivating land, and preserving cultural and religious identity. Reconstruction occurs through self-sustaining local efforts using recycled and salvaged materials, while international actors provide primarily humanitarian aid rather than long-term development support. In the absence of functioning governance structures, survival itself becomes a form of resistance and preservation of national identity.

The corresponding Israeli scenario, “Israel 100”, developed by a team of professionals for Israel in 2048, reflects a prolonged stalemate shaped by fear, mistrust, and weak political leadership on both sides. Israeli society maintains relative normalcy but remains permanently alert to recurring violence and instability. Limited economic interaction and restricted border zones provide some mutual benefits, yet the broader conflict remains unresolved. The “Israel 100” framework prioritises long-term planning for Israeli society while largely excluding Palestinian territories from its vision. Israel sustains diplomatic and economic relations internationally, but ongoing control over Palestinians continues to generate criticism and instability.

Neo-Oslo / Oslo C

The “Neo-Oslo” scenario envisions another interim political arrangement shaped largely by external actors, preserving limited Palestinian autonomy without genuine sovereignty. The Palestinian Authority remains internationally recognised but weak, functioning as a caretaker administration managing fragmented territories under continued Israeli control. Hamas is marginalised, while settlement expansion, military dominance, and territorial fragmentation eliminate the possibility of a viable contiguous Palestinian state. Reconstruction in Gaza is managed primarily by the Palestinian Authority with support from international donors, yet governance remains dependent on external aid and constrained by Israeli control over borders, movement, and resources. The Palestinian Authority focuses on maintaining bureaucratic and security structures rather than implementing transformative economic or political reforms, resulting in continued dependency, stagnation, and limited reconstruction capacity.

The corresponding Israeli scenario, “Oslo C,” reflects a strategy of conflict management rather than resolution. Israel maintains control through temporary arrangements and limited Palestinian self-governance while presenting itself internationally as a stabilising actor. Although appearing cooperative, this model sustains a highly managed form of occupation that prevents Palestinian sovereignty. Israel appears outwardly a typical state but internally continues to grapple with unresolved national and political questions rooted in the ongoing conflict.

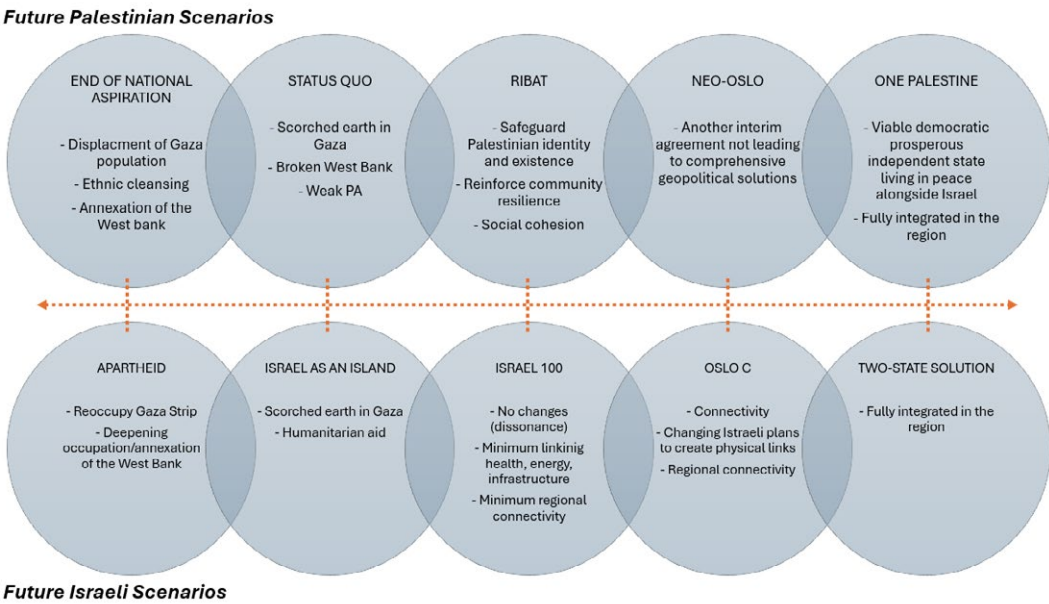
One Palestine / Two-State Solution

The “One Palestine” scenario represents the most optimistic future for Palestinians, envisioning the realisation of national aspirations through sovereignty, unity, justice, and self-determination achieved within a rights-based political settlement, linking Gaza and the West Bank into a single entity. In this scenario, the Israeli occupation ends through a historic peace agreement recognising secure borders and mutual sovereignty for both Palestine and Israel. Palestine emerges as a democratic, inclusive, and economically vibrant state integrated into regional cooperation alongside Jordan, Egypt, and Israel. Jerusalem becomes a shared capital and symbol of peace, while Gaza is transformed into a regional hub of innovation, trade, and culture. Reconstruction is embedded within a broader

regional development strategy emphasising cross-border cooperation in infrastructure, energy, transportation, sustainability, governance, and economic integration. Gaza reconnects with major Palestinian urban centres such as Hebron and Nablus, while the Jerusalem metropolis functions as a central economic link integrated into regional and global networks.

The corresponding Israeli scenario, the “Two-State Solution,” imagines Israel overcoming decades of fear, mistrust, and violence that culminated in the events of October 7th, 2023. Israeli society moves toward inclusivity, coexistence, and accountability, while peace with Palestine brings enhanced security, regional cooperation, and shared prosperity. Israel transitions from a heavily militarised society defined by conflict into a regional partner engaged in economic, environmental, and cultural collaboration. In this future, Israel becomes internationally respected as a model for reconciliation and regional integration.

Figure 2: Diagram adapted from the Gaza: A Vision of Hope report (Anthedon Initiative, 2025, p. 21)



Taken together, these scenarios demonstrate the profound interdependence between Palestinian and Israeli futures. Each trajectory directly shapes the other’s political, moral, and geopolitical condition. Central to this approach is the guiding principle of security for all. Both Palestinians and Israelis have equal rights to safety, dignity, and self-determination, and a successful path to peace will recognise that the security of one is intrinsically connected to the security of the other. The idea of privileging one side’s security over that of the other is thus counterproductive to the aim of true peace. The scenarios suggest that a just, stable, and prosperous Palestine is closely linked to a more secure, democratic, and internationally respected Israel, while increasing violence, displacement, and oppression produce growing instability, isolation, and crisis for both societies.

Importantly, even under the most optimistic scenario, lasting security and stability for both Palestinians and Israelis cannot be achieved without a credible political horizon leading to a negotiated two-state solution based on equality, rights, and international law. Sustainable peace ultimately depends on building equitable cross-border cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis while expanding regional cooperation with neighbouring countries and the European Union. Without such a political horizon, neither security nor long-term stability can be sustained for either side.

Throughout the various scenarios, interaction among territories plays a key role, either through the perspective of socio-economic integration or increasingly harsh divisions. Ideally, progress should move towards peace and stability for all, based on mutual recognition and respect, regarding not only self-determination and governance, but also the recognition of states and their borders. The sequence of events, as described in the context of post-1945 Europe, needs to be progressive, based on shared natural and cultural heritage and taking into consideration the role of sustainable development. Synchronising expectations is key to providing a realistic process and success. The Vision of Hope is based on the desire for all to live peacefully within a region that includes territories of different states. This long-term goal requires the establishment of a fully operational Palestinian State, with a national government and local authorities, as well as a framework for integration which allows for free movement of goods, services, and persons across national borders. It is precisely in this context that the cross-border dimensions of integration are essential to take into consideration to ensure win-win situations across the region.

Cross-border components of these scenarios, within a multi-level governance framework

Regional Integration between Israel and Palestine

From this section forward, the current contribution presents proposals developed in the Vision of Hope report about cross-border governance and a framework for creating cross border integration and cooperation (Anthedon Initiative, 2025, p. 54-59), allowing free movement across national borders. Developing cultural and natural interactions was considered key to building trust. This could be realised through the engagement of international mechanisms such as Man and Biosphere programme, Ramsar and World Heritage Conventions and European mechanisms such as Faro and Landscape Conventions. The natural heritage corridors of Wadi Gaza/Nahal Besor, a river system that runs broadly from East to West, and the kurkar ridges, lithified sea-sand dunes resulting from transgressive coastlines and forming successive ridges along the shore running from North to South, transcend political boundaries and provide a foundation for environmental sustainability, integrated water management, food security, and resilience to climate extremes. At the same time, the shared cultural heritage embodied in the historic itineraries, the Via Maris and Incense Route, and the Pentapolis offers a framework

for fostering trust, dialogue, and hope, serving as a basis for meaningful cross-border cooperation. For World Heritage, Wadi Gaza is a Palestinian nomination to the Tentative List and the Incense Route is an Israeli inscribed site since 2005, and both can be extended as transboundary nominations.

Moreover, the viability of a Palestinian territory requires economic integration, through trade and cross border engagement, with the neighbouring states, and particularly Israel. Such an integration is also necessary for Israel to respond to the need for a cross-border workforce. Strengthening such ties would be mutually beneficial and would also help support a larger goal of bridging divides between the two territories and the region. Economic ties are a concrete basis for integration, as evidenced by the example of the construction of the European Union that emerged through cooperation in this sphere. However, integration, which goes beyond cooperation, spans across various other dimensions as well, which interconnect to form strong foundations for mutual development and peace.

While regional integration is today far from the reality, and reconstruction plans implemented so far have not taken into account the need of cross-border integration, the Vision of Hope provides the framework to take short-term decisions that may have regional support in the long-term. It is important to note, however, that the situation is further complicated with the separation of Gaza from the West Bank.

An incremental process within the context of a long-term perspective (far beyond usual time scales for reconstruction after disasters within one single country) and an ambitious vision established from the very beginning are essential. What follows is based on a model of multi-level governance of borders (Peyrony, 2024) elaborated in the European context, within a study carried out by Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT) for the European Commission (Peyrony et al. 2022). The study assessed two years of border management during the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on border regions and their inhabitants, and then formulated recommendations for future management. The European paradigm was a virtual erasure of internal borders, but when in March 2020 they were brutally closed by States, without coordination between them, the border regions' inhabitants were affected in different dimensions of their daily life: as economic actors (e.g. cross-border workers) through the interruption or severe restrictions on cross-border mobility; as users of cross-border public services, the first to be interrupted; as citizens, suddenly only nationals and with European citizenship largely forgotten; as informed individuals, as information was suddenly no longer readily available across the border; as individuals inspired by the culture or ethics from other countries, because trust was fractured and residents on the other side of the border were suspected to be dangerous; as individuals connected within couples or families, when some were separated by borders. Authorities seemed to forget that each inhabitant might be at once a user of public services, a citizen, an informed and inspired individual, a parent, and a "person" as a wholly complex being, rather than simply an "essential worker". These six dimensions correspond to six spheres of collective action (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), which has

proved helpful in understanding European and cross-border integration (Peyrony, 2014; Peyrony, 2018); and symmetrically six categories of obstacles to cross-border integration (ISIG, 2013): economic, functional, institutional, informational, cultural and interpersonal, that are used in this section as a common thread.

All over the world, the COVID crisis, acting as a crash test, revealed the nature of cross-border daily interdependencies, of which public authorities and opinion often have no clear view. Their first reactions mainly took place within domestic frameworks through trade-offs between these six spheres, turning their backs on each border, which resulted in major difficulties of coordination across borders, and inappropriate border management measures. The assessment of two years of border management and its impact on border regions and their inhabitants have led to recommendations for their management in future crises of different natures (sanitary, security, migration), through a multi-level governance of borders.

To better contextualise the role of these six dimensions, especially in the context of Israel and Palestine, it is first essential to understand the role and form of borders themselves, also in relation to varying levels of governance.

The role of borders

Due to the conflictual history of the region, strongly controlled borders or even closed borders may appear as the only solution in the future. However, the Open Borders Paradox holds that secure borders depend on extensive cross-border cooperation both for their effectiveness and legitimacy, and not on closed borders and unilateral action (Leuprecht & Hataley, 2021). Comparative studies all over the world (Leuprecht et al. 2021) show that effective border security is most likely to emerge through the development of border security communities. Pluralistic forms of communication and interactions that extend beyond the borderline play a key role in the emergence of friendly and trustful relationships among border dyads. Border security communities can mature when they result from reciprocity: the accumulation of mutual trust, as in the case between Canada and the United States, or through a shared pre-existing higher authority, as in the European Union. In both contexts, coordination constitutes the essential first stage of laying the foundation for deeper cooperation and, ultimately, collaboration: the ultimate expression of resilient border governance and trust.

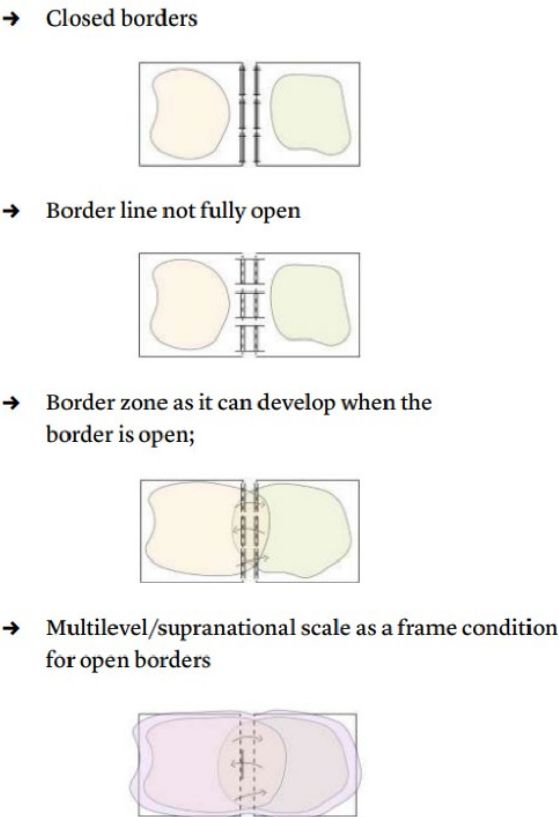
The future of Israel and Palestine will depend not only on political agreements, but also on the gradual development of practical forms of cooperation capable of fostering stability, prosperity, and mutual trust. In this perspective, a multidimensional approach is essential. Rather than seeking immediate full integration, this perspective emphasises realistic and incremental progress, beginning with limited cooperation and confidence-building measures while allowing different sectors and border regions to evolve at different speeds and across different levels - local, national and regional, with different spatial dimensions based on their functionality.

Following this model, the present contribution develops the aforementioned six-dimension approach within a multi-level governance, including three levels: local authorities; States; and a supranational level which, in the Gaza context, includes UN agencies, regional organisations and international donors, summarised in the table on pages 243 – 245.

The question of levels of governance in the context of cross-border integration is particularly important. Local levels of governance on either side of a border can cooperate on a scale of their cross-border area, defined by close proximity exchanges and bottom-up initiatives. These can be supported on a national level, potentially through bilateral agreements to facilitate cross-border flows and initiatives. Eventually, and looking at the European Union for inspiration, a third, supranational level can be envisioned. In this context, a supranational level unites territories under a series of metaphorical umbrellas, each creating a unifying force that can contribute not only to the creation of common policies, but also the building of shared identities. Across all levels, cooperation can be facilitated, or hindered, by the form of the border in place, as described below:

- Closed: A closed physical border greatly limits the extent of possible exchange and thus of cooperation, making integration difficult. Citizens of one territory, despite close vicinity with those of the other, rarely interact. This increases risk for negative perceptions of the “other”.
- Controlled: With a controlled border, interactions can take place but remain limited. Checks at the border discourage the creation of a coherent cross-border living area, and borders are seen mainly as lines to be crossed rather than integrated zones.
- Open: An open border facilitates integration by decreasing barriers between territories. People can cross national lines freely and thus develop interpersonal connections with their neighbours on the other side of the border. This can further be supported by bilateral agreements which can ease logistical difficulties related to entering and exiting a said territory.
- Open with a supranational level of governance: A supranational level of governance allows for a common structure that spans beyond national borders. Supranational policies create uniting factors that do not differentiate between national citizenships, thus creating a harmonious, unifying sphere which allows cross-border integration to prosper. While this level does not necessarily change the physical representation of an open border, it introduces a level of governance that supports cooperation and cohesion across territories.

Figure 3: Diagram adapted from the *Gaza: A Vision of Hope* report (Anthedon Initiative, 2025, p. 13)



Dimensions of Integration

The conditions of borders, which are closely linked to multi-level governance, have repercussions across the various dimensions of integration. Different levels of governance can exist simultaneously in diverse forms for each dimension. As referenced previously, cross-border integration can be considered across six main dimensions: economics and employment, functional infrastructures, governance and management, information systems, socio-cultural elements, and interpersonal connections. These are further detailed in the following paragraphs.

Economics and Employment

Economic fragmentation and border restrictions currently limit trade, investment, and labour mobility between Israel, Palestine, including the separated Gaza and West Bank, and neighbouring territories. Beginning phases of integration tend to focus on facilitating controlled cross-border economic activity, including trade corridors and regulated workforce mobility. In the short and medium term, virtual connectivity and sector-specific cooperation, particularly in technology, agriculture, and creative industries, could help rebuild economic ties while avoiding immediate political sensitivities. Over

time, bilateral agreements could establish cross-border economic zones with coordinated industrial policies and shared investment strategies. In the long term, the development of a supranational economic system enabling the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people could be envisioned, thereby strengthening regional interdependence, economic growth, and stability.

Functional Integration and Public Services

Public infrastructure and essential services currently operate within strictly separated national systems, often resulting in inefficiencies, unequal access, and weak emergency coordination. In the perspective of cross-border integration, cooperation in key sectors such as healthcare, energy, water management, transportation, and emergency response is prioritised. Early initiatives could involve shared infrastructure projects and coordinated service delivery in border areas, particularly where reconstruction and humanitarian needs are most urgent. As cooperation deepens, regional planning mechanisms could integrate infrastructure development and public service management across borders. The role of the metropolis in providing services that go beyond the city could provide a valuable basis for cross-border actions. Such coordination would improve resilience, optimise resource allocation, and ensure that critical systems operate more effectively during both crises and periods of recovery.

Governance and Institutional Cooperation

Governance structures in the region remain largely confined to national jurisdictions, limiting opportunities for institutional coordination and joint policymaking. The perspective of cross-border integration proposes an incremental approach beginning with bilateral agreements that support practical cooperation on shared concerns such as infrastructure, environmental management, and economic regulation. At the first stage, institutional cooperation for addressing environmental challenges is envisaged with specific action for coastal erosion and climate extremes. In later phases, dedicated cross-border governance bodies could be established with democratic decision-making mechanisms and representation from local and national authorities. Ultimately, successful integration envisions a multi-level governance system combining local, metropolitan, national, regional, and supranational institutions. Such a system would provide the regulatory and institutional foundation necessary to sustain long-term cross-border integration while balancing sovereignty with regional cooperation.

Information and Communication

Fragmented information systems and restricted media cooperation currently hinder transparency, coordinated policymaking, and public understanding across borders. Cross-border integration therefore emphasises the importance of improving cross-border data-sharing mechanisms and encouraging collaborative media and research initiatives. Initial steps could include cooperation on statistics, public information systems, and policy

analysis, helping governments and institutions make more evidence-based decisions. In the longer term, transnational information networks could emerge through harmonised statistical frameworks, integrated research institutions, and cooperative media platforms. These initiatives would not only strengthen governance capacity but also contribute to the development of a more connected regional public sphere involving citizens, civil society, and businesses.

Cultural Integration, Heritage, and Identity

Cultural heritage and educational systems in Israel and Palestine are currently shaped by separate national narratives, often reinforcing division rather than shared understanding. To work towards cross-border integration, cultural and educational exchanges are an essential foundation for building trust and social cohesion. In 1972 under the aegis of UNESCO, a German-Polish Textbook Commission was established to replace distorted ideas with historical truth. In 2008, the Commission began work on the “Joint German-Polish History Book” with the first volume of the textbook published in 2016. Early initiatives in the context of Gaza could include joint educational programmes, academic partnerships, youth exchanges, and collaborative cultural events. Over time, more institutionalised forms of cooperation could emerge, including joint heritage conservation projects, integrated cultural institutions, and educational curricula that acknowledge the histories and identities of multiple communities. The identification of shared heritage both cultural and natural may develop into trans-boundary and trans-national World Heritage serial nominations or joint Man and Biosphere programmes. This approach would aim to strengthen regional cohesion while preserving the distinct cultural and historical identities of all populations involved.

Interpersonal Connections, Families, and Communities

Legal restrictions on mobility, residency, and personal status currently create major obstacles for cross-border families and communities. Cross-border integration proposes initial bilateral measures to recognise and protect cross-border family rights, including residency arrangements and mobility permits. In later stages, a broader transnational legal framework could address migration policies, refugee status, residency rights, and civil protections across the region. Such reforms would help ensure legal consistency, safeguard human rights, and promote social integration. Strengthening interpersonal connections is viewed as a critical component of long-term peacebuilding, as durable stability ultimately depends not only on institutions and economies, but also on sustained relationships between communities and individuals.

Table 1: The Dimensions of Integration in Different Border Scenarios

Types of space/ dimensions of cohesion	National territories; closed borders	Border line not fully open	Border zone as it can develop when the border is fully open; bi-lateral intergovernmental arrangements	Multilevel/ supranational scale as a frame condition for open borders
Economics and Employment	States are only concerned with flows within domestic markets; closed border, no cross-border flow.	Cross-border economic flows (commuting Cross- border workers, goods...) are allowed. Cross-border integration only economic No common cross- border management > spill over effect impacting non-cross- border actors Cross-border workers generally paying income tax abroad, but no public investment funding across the border	Consideration of cross-border living areas (not only workers, consumers; also citizens) Cross-border markets, and cross-border economic policies Cross-border Free trade area zones Co-development: Bi- lateral agreements on Cross-border development, tax retransfer	Regional Free trade area Free movement of persons, goods, services, capital "Green lanes" for goods. Supranational framework for taxation of cross- border work, social security Supranational funding programme for cross-border activities
Functional - Infrastructure, rubble and de-mining - Environmental, health and wellbeing - Spatial/ Planning	National territories: bundles of domestic public services maintained by States	Public services end at the border Limited interoperability Untapped potential for economies of scale and agglomeration Borders as filters	Cross-border metropolitan integration Cross-border sectoral/spatial planning Cross-border public services guaranteed in case of crisis: cross-border living area card. Health criteria coordinated on each border	Regional harmonisation of national frameworks, Referring to SDGs Cross-border public services regional framework, Green pass integrating the needs of cross- border living areas Common health criteria

Types of space/ dimensions of cohesion	National territories; closed borders	Border line not fully open	Border zone as it can develop when the border is fully open; bi-lateral intergovernmental arrangements	Multilevel/ supranational scale as a frame condition for open borders
Governance and management	Institutional sphere embedded within each State, founded on national democracy-limited to national citizens State provides security, solidarity, public goods and services via public policies State monopoly of legitimate violence	Possibility of cross-border cooperation structures No or little coordination on the borders	Bi-lateral treaties Cross-border governments or structures, under democratic control, with full mandates and competences Cross-border democracy: Cross-border citizen debate forums; towards cross-border election Towards Cross-border citizenship Dual citizenship recognised and encouraged	Supra national governance Multi-level governance of borders, regulated at supranational level Transnational citizenship in particular in the cross-border context Transnational competence in crisis management, public health
Information, integration and modelling	Statistics, production of social sciences, education and media organised at national level State monopoly of evidence	Border, place of contradiction between States Lack of cross-border information, redoubled in case of crisis Misunderstanding	Cross-border media, cross-border data Cross-border information organised on the basis of cross-border and multilevel structures	Transnational, multi-level information, media Common statistical system

Types of space/ dimensions of cohesion	National territories; closed borders	Border line not fully open	Border zone as it can develop when the border is fully open; bi-lateral intergovernmental arrangements	Multilevel/ supranational scale as a frame condition for open borders
Demography, social – heritage	Civil society structured within national framework Each national territory is a community united by a “national narrative”, heritage, common language	Borders: places where different cultures, visions, languages, clash Boundary between 2 national universes turning their backs on each other	Emergence of a cross-border civil society People to people, educational, cultural (heritage) projects to rebuild trust Learning the neighbour’s language Common history teaching Knowledge of the past, vision of common future, preconditions for cross-border integration and its maintenance in case of crises	Emergence of a common transnational civil society Transnational education programmes
Inter-personal	Life of couples and families regulated within domestic framework (civil status) Recognition of national citizens only Networks in a predominantly national framework	Only economic agents (cross-border workers) or national citizens considered Non-recognition of non-nationals (including in case of cross-border couples or families) Distrust Networks back-to-back at the border (boundary)	Guarantee of rights for persons, couples, families, living in cross-border living areas (beyond economic or national citizen status); including migrants, refugees Cross-border living areas cards Informal, interpersonal cross-border links, going beyond routines: resources for cross-border public action, to be reinforced Multi-level structured cross-border networks of persons	Family rights; migrant and refugee rights acknowledged in a transnational perspective Transnational framework Extended networks at transnational scale

Overall, the cross-border integration framework recognises that progress across these six dimensions will not occur uniformly. The fluid and diverse border forms and sectors may advance at different speeds depending on political conditions, security concerns, and local realities. First stage processes could, for example, prioritise virtual activities in “Information, integration and modelling” dimensions and “Inter-personal” dimensions. Shared public services, labour mobility, local institutional cooperation, and people-to-people initiatives, are also foundational building blocks for a gradual deepening of connections. In the context of Gaza and its metropolitan region beyond borders in Israel and Egypt, international donors and regional organisations are expected to play an important role as facilitators and neutral brokers throughout the process. While full supranational integration may remain a long-term aspiration, gradual cooperation, practical reconstruction efforts, and sustained regional engagement can create the foundations for a more peaceful, stable, and interconnected future for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Physical recovery and reconstruction need to be accompanied by a Vision of Hope. Multiple strategies should be employed and adapted to different locations; historical patterns require an urban restoration approach while areas of public land and refugee camps need processes capable of controlling urban metamorphoses using design mechanisms. This would respond to a bottom-up people-centred approach of self-help. There is a need for a growing evolutionary mechanism that sees urban environments as fluid dynamic equilibriums to be continuously renegotiated. For this, Albrecht & Galli (2023) propose urban triggers and backbones, being elements shaped by design, as a system of hooks and suggestions capable of defining an open range of possibilities.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of Gaza cannot be understood solely as a question of rebuilding physical infrastructure. While restoring housing, services, and economic activity is essential, long-term recovery ultimately depends on rebuilding social cohesion and restoring trust, within and beyond borders, as well as creating the political and institutional conditions necessary for lasting peace. The Anthedon initiative strives to ensure that reconstruction becomes a process through which communities actively shape their future rather than merely receive external assistance, an approach that aims to reintroduce a sense of collective purpose and avoid reproducing the very fragmentation, dysfunctionality and vulnerability that have dominated the landscape over the past decades.

Gaza’s recovery also cannot be isolated from the broader regional context. Sustainable reconstruction requires moving beyond frameworks that treat borders exclusively as lines of separation. Instead, reconstruction efforts should keep open the possibility of future cross-border cooperation in areas such as trade, environmental management, infrastructure, cultural exchange, and economic development. While such prospects may appear distant amid the current realities of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, they are vital considerations from the earliest stages of reconstruction. Synchronising expectations in the phasing of such a process may also benefit be furthering and monitoring the scenarios

together with grass-roots actions on the ground in effort to build trust. The decisions made today will shape not only Gaza's future, but also the opportunities for integration and peace across the entire region.

As explored in the present paper, the European project offers valuable lessons in this regard. In the aftermath of the Second World War, proposals for cross-border cooperation between former adversaries would have likely been seen as premature if not unimaginable. Yet the gradual process of European integration, which began unfolding years after a formal end to the war, demonstrated the power of shared institutions, economic interdependence, and cross-border collaboration in building cohesion and peace in former areas of violent conflict. Although the historical and political circumstances of Europe and the Middle East undoubtedly differ, the European experience illustrates the importance of embedding reconstruction within a broader vision of regional cooperation rather than limiting it to strictly national recovery.

Ultimately, lasting peace and prosperity in Gaza will require both local ownership and regional engagement. Reconstruction must therefore be conceived not only as the rebuilding of a city, but as an opportunity to lay the foundations for new forms of cooperation across borders. By combining community-led recovery with a long-term vision of regional connectivity, reconstruction can contribute to breaking cycles of fragmentation and violence and create pathways toward a more stable, resilient, and interconnected future for Gaza, Israel and their neighbouring countries.

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**Scott, W. James., & Wilson, M. Thomas (ed.) (2026).
Routledge Handbook of European Borderlands. Routledge.**

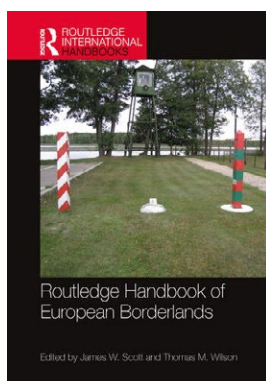
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teodor.gyelnik@cesci-net.eu**Keywords:** European Borderlands, Securitisation, Geopolitics, Cross-Border Relations, European Union, External Frontiers

In 2025, Routledge published an edited volume that provides an interesting research into the evolving phenomenon of European borderlands. Moving beyond traditional geopolitical analysis, the volume integrates a diverse array of interdisciplinary frameworks and innovative methodological perspectives with the aim to examine what is happening in the selected European borderlands. The contributors bridge multiple research fields such as sociology, human geography, geopolitics and political science, thus they afford a nuanced examination of how borders function not merely as lines on a map, but rather as dynamic spaces.

The *Routledge Handbook* brings together heterogeneous perspectives to highlight the social, political and cultural dynamics which are capable of shaping the borderland spaces. James W. Scott and Thomas M. Wilson provide the point of departure for this volume, framing the conceptual and research approach through which the European borderlands are examined. To be more specific, "...borders and border studies, and borderlands and borderland studies, cannot



be easily contained, spatially and conceptually. They do not fit neatly into the boxes and two-dimensional matrices applied to them by map makers and cosmopolitan elites alike. Thinking and acting beyond the box is demanded of border scholars, and necessary in the continuing scholarship of European borderlands."

The scope of the book is pan-continental, addressing the social and political contours of borderland regions from the post-Brexit United Kingdom to the Russian frontier, and from the strategic reaches of the Arctic to the complex maritime boundaries of the Mediterranean. Borderlands are marked by specific features that result from either extensive interaction or notable separation. They can be understood as spaces that are profoundly shaped by both the boundary and cross-border mobility. These borderlands are polysemic and polymorphic, and each of them have its own specific characteristics shaped by historical legacies and contemporary circumstances. As Jussi P. Laine underlines in his chapter, "*Borderlands are spaces of political opportunity, but they are also particularly vulnerable to international disputes,*

crises and instability. Reflecting the vicissitudes of prevailing geopolitical contexts, borderlands are in a constant state of change and becoming.”

Why are borders and borderlands important in the contemporary world? European borders remain unsettled, even in the era of European integration and Europeanisation. Integration does not eliminate the historical, social and political dynamics that constantly challenge and transform territorial limits. Consequently, the *Routledge Handbook* argues that we experience the ‘revenge of borders’ which is mainly manifested through the rise of populist political forces, revanchist impulses, nationalist fervour and neo-imperial aggression. This revenge highlights that borders and borderlands are explicitly reasserted as visible instruments of identity, control and geopolitical competition.

The *Routledge Handbook* is divided into four major parts. The first part focuses on the ‘Borderlands of (in)security and control’, exploring topics such as post-Brexit borderlands, borderland geopolitics, borders and bloodlands, the EU-Belarus border, and the impact of the COVID-19. The second part examines ‘Creativity, cooperation, and resilience’ researching regions such as the Finnish-Swedish borderland, the Greater Region, the Galicia-Northern Portugal Euroregion, and the Italy-France frontier, while also covering border twin cities and spatial planning. The third part concentrates on ‘Mashing and clashing sovereignties and identities’ including the Irish borderlands, Brexitism in Northern Ireland, the European governance of refugeehood, populism, and the Danish-German borderland. The final part investigates ‘European borderlands in the era of (post)

globalisation’, involving topics such as Hungary as a borderland nation, the case of Transcarpathia, Turkey as a European borderland, the reconstruction of the nation-state, Poland’s eastern frontiers, transboundary nature protection, and the Finnish–Russian borderland.

In the following part of this review, I present several chapters from the *Routledge Handbook* and summarise their main messages.

Thom Tyerman and Nick Vaughan-Williams write a chapter on securitisation and epistemic borderwork in the British/European borderlands. The chapter traces the historical evolution of securitisation policies within the English Channel, framing it as a privileged borderland space. The study illustrates how the Channel functions as a primary driver of political, social and cultural transformation. They argue that borderlands are imprinted with post-colonial racism, post-imperial/post-colonial ‘melancholy’ and that they resonate with nostalgia for colonial racial hierarchies infused with British nationalism “...that reassert a racialized geopolitics and orders subjects according to a hierarchy of humanity.” The central thesis of the authors is that research of contemporary racialised border politics remain fundamentally incomplete and flawed without confronting the enduring ghosts of colonial racism. These spectres are not merely historical relics, but rather, they are forces that are still powerfully present in modern sovereignty through ‘epistemologies of ignorance’. This means that modern border regimes are sustained by a structured production of non-knowledge, which creates an intentional blindness regarding the link between imperial/colonial history and current border

practices. Consequently, this systemic ignorance allows the discriminatory logic of the past to be rebranded and normalised within the high-tech, securitised landscapes of the 21st century of Europe, thus ensuring that colonial hierarchies remain embedded in the very fabric of contemporary border management.

Jaume Castan Pinos and Steen Bo Frandsen present a chapter on borderlands and geopolitics, emphasising the deep interrelation between geopolitical dynamics and the historical aspects of borderlands. They argue that borders and borderlands are not just some peripheral spaces, but they are explicitly at the centre of geopolitics, noting that “*the weight of history has significant reverberations for contemporary borderland geopolitics. Territorial unsettledness in borderlands can indeed be reactivated through narrative, discourse and, more dramatically, through political – and military – action.*”

Their central premise is that borders are inherently unsettled, shaped by ongoing geopolitical turbulence, as well as by revisionist narratives promoted by nation-states. As a result, the chapter advocates rethinking of geopolitics through a borderland lens, emphasising the intersection of instability, memory and power. The Russian – Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 and escalated dramatically in 2022, serves as a clear example of this argument, illustrating the fragility of the geopolitical status quo and the enduring capacity of borderlands to become focal points of conflict.

Tatiana Zhurzhenko addresses the Ukrainian – Russian border as ‘borderlands and bloodlands’. The chapter describes the historical development of borderlands and

border measures within the post-Soviet framework. Until 1991, the administrative boundary separating the two Soviet republics was neither formally demarcated nor monitored and it played a negligible role. In the first two decades after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian – Russian border ranked among the busiest, with millions of people crossing annually. The most common motivations were tourism, family visits, small-scale trade across the border and labour migration. Nevertheless, the borders that emerged in 1991 separated not only two independent and sovereign states, but also the troubled post-Soviet present from the idealised Soviet past.

The new border not only separates the two post-Soviet state entities, but it has also become a space where state-building converges with European integration and globalisation, often with clashing identities and processes. The author insightfully remarks that “*the Ukrainian-Russian war seems to be a moment of historical rupture, a farewell to the ‘post-Soviet’.* Glued together by societal inertia and Soviet nostalgia, joint socialization, mass media and pop culture, the common geocultural space which had emerged from the disintegration of the USSR three decades ago is now crushed by the war as a powerful identity-building factor.”

Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola’s chapter investigates the historical and multi-layered dynamics of cross-border relations, cooperation and identity formation in the Finnish – Swedish border region. The Finnish – Swedish borderland is presented as a valuable space of everyday cross-border interactions, institutional cooperation and shared regional identity. It serves as a case study of how cross-border regionalisation, Nordic cooperation and Europeanisation

initiatives have materialised in specific local contexts. The chapter looks at the process of reinvention of border and problematising the idea of a borderless borderland. Despite periodic securitisation measures and state interventions, cross-border interactions have not been cancelled, but rather adapted to the changed realities. The central argument emphasises that cross-border cooperation in the region has evolved through a historically path-dependent process that continues to sustain and reproduce the idea of a long-standing 'border of peace'.

Christophe Sohn examines the Greater Region, located on the western flank of Rhineland Europe and involving parts of Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg. The Greater Region represents a cross-border cooperation initiative encompassing more than 65 thousand km² and approximately 11.7 million inhabitants, which places it among the largest and most densely populated euroregions in Europe; subsequently, it can be rightly considered as a true laboratory of European integration and cross-border cooperation.

The Greater Region has emerged through the exploitation of cross-border differences, with Luxembourg acting as the main polarising force. In order to maintain its competitive edge, Luxembourg diversified its economic activities and oriented itself toward niche policies. This shift involved a strong specialisation in the financial sector and investment funds, which helped the country to consolidate its pivotal role within the region. Subsequently, Luxembourg has become a key driver of cross-border economic dynamics, shaping the overall growth trajectory of

the Greater Region and attracting a large number of cross-border workers, which exceeded 200,000 daily commuters in 2020. Nevertheless, the region faces numerous challenges. The first major challenge is the saturation of transport routes, such as road networks, bus services and train lines, which substantially increases commuting times. *"If obtaining a job in Luxembourg generally translates into a significant rise in the material level of existence, the living conditions of the cross-border workers are often marked by an exhausting rhythm of daily commuting."* The second challenge is that cross-border interactions generate little endogenous development, and the main dependence on Luxembourg remains largely unchallenged; therefore, *"the increased socio-economic interactions between Luxembourg and its neighboring regions do not contribute to territorial convergence. On the contrary, we are witnessing the reproduction of cross-border disparities, which undermines the economic, social, and territorial cohesion of the Greater Region as a whole."*

Ekaterina Mikhailova explores border twin cities in Europe and she aims to outline the development and significance of twin cities throughout Europe. The chapter looks at the genesis, geographies and institutional background of the European twin cities.

In earlier times of the European continent, twin cities frequently served both as sites of military and diplomatic confrontation between neighbouring sovereign entities and as venues for negotiation and international agreements. In today's world, twin cities can rightly be understood as spaces of transition par excellence, serving as laboratories of integration, as important centres of para-diplomacy, as key engines fuelling the

internalisation of regional economies and/or as experimental zones for innovative cooperation. As the author aptly writes that “...*twin cities hold the key to constructing an ever more united Europe.*”

Moreover, the importance of twin cities is highly relevant today, because they continue to multiply due to post-Cold War border changes on the one hand, and shrinking of effective distance on the other. These developments have increased cross-border interactions and created new opportunities for cross-border cooperation.

Christian Lamour discusses populism and borderlands as the use of spatial objects in the name of the people. The basic aim of the chapter is to examine plurality through an overarching framework that conceptualises populism as a discursive strategy. In this view, populism depends on the construction of antagonistic relations between the people, the elite and various outsiders, often articulated in spatial terms. This antagonism frequently involves explicit or implicit references to open, closed, or controlled borders and borderlands, which become key symbolic sites in populist narratives. Such discourses strongly resonate with a segment of the population that perceives political, economic and cultural transformations as negative (often experiencing as an existential threat), and interpret these changes within their own lived environments. By linking identity and territory with a perceived loss of existence, populist rhetoric amplifies a sense of grievance and frames border issues as central to a struggle between ordinary citizens and those who are perceived as responsible for their marginalisation

Within the populist framework, the neoliberal interpretation of the world plays a central role. Neoliberalism has been a dominant ideology that deeply shapes our everyday lives. It accompanies our late-modern era, resonating across multiple domains such as the economy, state structures, taxation systems, market strategies, education and/or broader social relations. The acceleration of neoliberal reforms has generated a profound sense of alienation for a large segment of society, as individuals increasingly experience economic insecurity, social fragmentation and the erosion of collective institutions. Consequently, this influence not only restructures markets and public policies, but it also redefines how people understand themselves and their place within society, hence contributing to widespread feeling of disconnection.

Péter Balogh contributes a chapter on Hungary as a borderland nation. The author claims that Hungary is a clear case of a borderland nation, more specifically, “...*the omnipresence of borders on different levels of Hungarian society makes it a borderland nation par excellence.*” Hungary is at the intersection of historical legacies, geopolitical positioning and contemporary political practices, “*Throughout its history, Hungary has repeatedly grappled with the question whether it is part of the West or of something else. As in most places even beyond Hungary, the opposite of the West would typically be some version of the East, which in the Hungarian case has been particularly complex to define.*”

The chapter offers a multi-level analysis of Hungary. The first is the civilisational-ideational level, where Hungary’s Western identity is underlined with the Christian religion and with its Christian self-image.

However, various forms of Easternism have periodically been emerged in Hungary in order to orient the country eastward. This attempt reflects a small state's strategy to escape its long-standing geopolitical and economic marginality. The second level is the regional alliance building. At this level, Hungary has focused on strengthening Central European cooperation with the aim of creating a political and ideological counterweight to the West. This level has emerged primarily within the framework of the Visegrad Group and/or the Three Seas Initiative. The next level is the kin-state politics that emphasises the idea of virtual reunification of the Carpathian Basin. Finally, the border securitisation level includes elements such as the construction of a long fence and measures to protect against illegal migration, which have been explicitly present since 2015.

James W. Scott focuses on borderlands geo(ethno) politics at the EU's external frontiers, namely in Transcarpathia. Transcarpathia is a western region of Ukraine situated along the borders with Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, and "*... the region of Transcarpathia is a product of long-term historical processes and particularly of the geopolitical and territorial shifts that have taken place since the early 20th century*". In current constellation, Transcarpathia is an example of an archetypal borderland contestation in which its relationship with Ukrainian history, culture and territoriality becomes a geopolitical tool for various external actors. The author claims that the resulting conflict unfolds across several layers. One important layer is rooted within the Russian geopolitical thinking, which generates a narrative in which Ukraine and the structures of the European Union are

framed as key participants in a broader civilisational competition. This perspective is closely intertwined with ethno-political narratives of Russia that underline cultural, linguistic and historical ties extending beyond the current borders of Russia. Within these discourses, Ukraine is portrayed as a liminal and contested space situated along a symbolic and geopolitical fracture line between East and West. This means that the country is depicted as a strategic ground, where both Russia and the European Union are seen to pursue significant political, economic, security and cultural interests, reinforcing perceptions of rivalry, influence and competing spheres of belonging.

Ramazan Aras and Ibrahim Emre Yanik discuss territorial security walls, sovereignty and the reconstruction of the nation-state. The analysis addresses the dual role of the Turkish security wall in preventing trans-border Kurdish political and armed movements and in obstructing migrant routes toward the European Union. The principal and symbolic instrument of this Turkish policy is the concrete wall barrier that extends over 828 kilometres, thus making it the third largest border wall after the Great Wall of China and the wall along the United States and Mexico. The authors describe the border wall in the following way, the "*...newly erected security walls not as indicators of overcompensation, but as adaptation of old techniques to new crises*"; subsequently, Turkey has enhanced its governing and surveillance capacities across its national territory, population and national identity. What is new in Turkey's border policy is that the security wall is not primarily designed to defend against a conventional Westphalian sovereign actor. Instead, its main targets

are non-state entities, such as individuals and transnational networks. Moreover, the purpose of the wall is not only to reduce permeability, but also to contribute to the criminalisation of transnational political mobility, particularly affecting Kurdish and other minorities. Consequently, the authors argue that the Turkish border project has been able to effectively and efficiently reproduce territorial sovereignty and national imaginary.

Jussi P. Laine addresses the shifting significance of the Finnish and Russian borderland. The chapter provides valuable historical approach about the genesis of the Finnish – Russian borderland, including pre and post-soviet context and the 2014 ‘watershed’. The Finnish and Russian borderland serves as a laboratory for examining broader socio-political changes impacted by geopolitical shifts. This specific borderland once was imagined as part of a new neighbourhood policy approach, EU inspired ideas of cross-border cooperation and post-national regionalism that may foster partnerships and open new spaces for interaction. During this period, cross-border relations expanded rapidly, involving the establishment and development of communication channels in various sectors, with diverse actors and individuals. However, the borderland is currently a strongly securitised zone of tension and the initial optimism has disappeared. Historical memories of conflict have returned and the relations are profoundly dominated by geopolitical imaginations and everyday geopolitics. As a result, engagement with ‘otherness’ is back again. The ‘We’ is mentally distanced from the perceived threats of the ‘Other’, accordingly, the borderland has become a

clashing space for distinguishing the ‘East’ from the ‘West’ in historical, political, mental and cultural terms. Simply, Finland resonates as an ‘exposed outpost of the Western community’.

To conclude, the edited volume of James W. Scott and Wilson M. Thomas ‘*Routledge Handbook of European Borderlands*’ provides an insightful overview of the evolution of European borderlands. The book raises important issues and articulates critical questions concerning borders, borderlands, border measures, sovereignty, securitisation and cross-border cooperation. It underlines that borders are continuously reshaped by (geo)political, social and economic forces, while it also demonstrates the complex interplay between state authority and regional integration. Overall, the *Routledge Handbook* offers valuable theoretical and empirical contributions for scholars interested in understanding the changing nature of borders and borderlands in contemporary Europe.

This book is especially recommended for the academic community, particularly students and scholars in political science, international relations and law, political geography, geopolitics and border studies. It offers a valuable theoretical and methodological resources for those who are interested in deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics of European borderlands. Additionally, the book is relevant for individuals who engage with borders professionally or personally, such as policymakers, legal practitioners, border officials, NGO workers and researchers, as well as for citizens who experience border crossings and related restrictions in their daily lives.

Engelbrekt, Bakardjieva Antonina., Ekman, Per., Michalski, Anna., & Oxelheim, Lars (ed.) (2024). The Borders of the European Union in a Conflictual World. Interdisciplinary European Studies. Palgrave Macmillan

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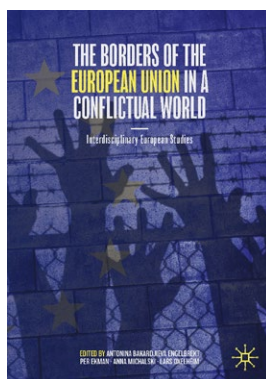
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Keywords: European Union, Conflicting Norms, Security, European Security Order, Borders

Palgrave Macmillan published an edited volume that brings together interdisciplinary research examining the European Union's borders amid ongoing geopolitical, security and humanitarian conflicts. The volume explores borders, their governance, contestation and redefinition, thus highlighting their political, social and spatial implications.

The book explores how these borders are shaped by a global environment of conflicting norms, rising strategic tensions, rivalry and competition between systems and regulatory frameworks. It focuses on the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting geopolitical shift on European security and trade power, while also examining the Union's capacity to project norms, the insider-outsider dynamics of its international market regime, and the evolution of border policy as it seeks to balance security with openness.

The basic point of departure of the book is that following the fall of the Soviet Union and the transformation



of socialist countries into liberal democracies, a specific European security order emerged. This order was shaped primarily through the integration of post-socialist states into the institutional frameworks of the European Union and NATO, which provided both political stability and security guarantees. However, this security architecture was significantly challenged by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and it was definitively broken by the Russian military action against Ukraine in February 2022. As a result, long-standing assumptions about stability, borders and cooperation in Europe have been fundamentally reassessed. *"Russia's war against Ukraine can be seen at once as a military assault on the role of the EU in Europe and constitutes as such the most direct and clear challenge to the Union's ability to act in accordance with its values."* (p. 119-120); therefore, *"Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine will affect Europe's borders for a long time to come."* (p. 233)

Furthermore, global warming and unstable weather patterns are expected to intensify migration pressures. Extreme heat, droughts and other climate-related disasters force people to leave their home countries in search of safety and livelihood. Consequently, Europe may face growing waves of climate-induced displacement and cross-border movement, which could further strain capacities across the region, including political, social and economic dimension.

In this increasingly unstable global environment, where “*the EU’s external borders are likely to remain the physical flashpoint of the insecurity and war...*” (p. 278), the European Union’s internal and external borders are gaining renewed political, strategic and security-related significance amid intensifying tensions.

Antonina Bakardjieva Engelbrekt, Per Ekman, Anna Michalski and Lars Oxelheim address the perspectives on the significance of borders in Europe. The authors note that the concept of borders has developed in a distinct way in Europe compared with many other regions of the world. In Europe, borders were primarily understood as dividing lines between inhabited territories, whereas in other continents the frontier often represented the boundary between settled land and wilderness. The chapter offers a historical interpretation of borders, examining how the border and bordering concepts were understood in different eras, such as during Roman times, the Middle Ages, the Peace of Westphalia, the 20th century, the Cold War and the period of globalisation.

Johanna Pettersson Fürst presents a chapter on EU border policy, explaining how the EU and its member states address the various challenges they face in this area. While the member states opened up internal borders, the external borders remained untested. This approach was profoundly challenged by successive migration waves, first triggered by the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, and later by the major refugee crisis of 2015. These migration pressures, together with internal border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and public health crises, have pushed border politics to the centre of European integration, challenging the long-standing assumption of open internal borders. As a result, the Schengen system has been put under intense pressure, revealing weaknesses in coordination, solidarity and crisis management. These developments have generated debates about the system’s resilience, its capacity to respond to future shocks and the long-term future of free movement within Europe.

This means that Europe’s borders were tightened internally and externally during the 2010s and 2020s. However, as the author notes “*...the introduction of internal border controls has not substantially reduced the willingness of member states to cooperate; on the contrary, it has in fact led to strengthened cooperation at the European level.*” (p. 32)

There are many consequences of this border reinforcement. One notable outcome is the resurgence of digital systems which are designed to monitor and survey borders more effectively. On the other hand, the reinforcement has fostered a ‘border - industrial complex’ in which political, economic and industrial interests and stakeholders mutually

reinforce each another. As a result, digital border-surveillance systems are increasingly locking us into complex and costly infrastructures, creating long-term dependencies and shaping policy priorities around technological investment. However, this ‘lock-in effect’ raises important concerns about the vulnerability of these systems, namely the risk of data breaches and the protection of the population’s integrity and privacy. It also highlights how technological dependence can limit policy choices and create long-term security and ethical challenges.

Fredrik Sjöholm explores the resurgence of borders in the global economy and examines the trajectory of EU trade and economic policy. The world appears to be entering a new phase in which globalisation has been losing its momentum. This loss is appropriately mirrored by the collapse of trade liberalisation in the last decade and half, while trade negotiations with China have experienced serious difficulties, too. Consequently, the political commitment to globalisation has weakened, and some regions have replaced highly open, outward-looking market policies with more inward-focused approaches. These shifts cannot be ignored by the European Union, because its economic policy is partly dependent on developments in China and in the United States.

As a result of these shifts in global economic policy, particularly China’s state-driven economic model with its subsidies and the United States’ growing protectionism, the EU has also begun to move towards a more interventionist and protectionist direction. This trend is reflected in increased industrial policy measures, strategic investment screening

and efforts to safeguard key sectors and supply chains, as well as in the growing use of trade protecting instruments to support the European industries, as the author writes, “*Exactly how much of the measures that actually will be implemented is uncertain, but it is clear that the idea of a more interventionist industrial policy has gained a foothold and is spreading across the Union.*” (p. 64)

Additionally, European stakeholders argue that the EU is falling behind its competitors in other countries, particularly in high-tech industries. This lag has shifted the prevailing understanding of the relationship between the economy and the state, promoting a growing belief in the ability of the state to generate positive impacts through strategic intervention and industrial policy. Nevertheless, the final message of the chapter is, “*as China and the US turn increasingly inward, the EU needs to step up and take greater responsibility for global trade liberalization. The challenge is great and requires a focused effort to both establish new trade agreements, particularly with the US and to revitalize the WTO.*” (p. 69)

Marja-Liisa Öberg focuses on the boundaries of the internal market within and beyond the European Union. She examines the internal market and the acceptance of the EU’s internal market *acquis* by third countries as a form of normative expansion. From this perspective, internal market has profoundly evolved itself from merely legal framework to a deeper and legally binding form of regulatory cooperation. Integration through the internal market emerges either as a path toward EU membership, or as an alternative form of integration that does not entail full membership. As a result, internal market should be rather

understood “...as a dynamic and geographically inclusive form of cooperation between the Union and its periphery.” (p. 87)

The chapter underlines a particular normative interpretation of the internal market, according to which the EU and its internal market *acquis* should not be understood as a purely altruistic project, but there is a need to recognise that it is driven primarily by economic and profit-oriented incentives. That means the internal market is narrated as a policy instrument capable of securing long-term commitments from neighbouring countries, while simultaneously strengthening their economic performance, institutional frameworks and societal structures. Consequently, the expansion of the internal market *acquis* and deeper, more intensive cooperation generate greater benefits for both partners, the EU and the neighbouring country.

The author formulates the argument as follows, “While the formal, physical and administrative borders of the EU remain, the boundaries of the internal market continue to be blurred and the European integration project broadened and deepened for the benefit of security and prosperity in the region.” (p. 89) Nevertheless, this normative expansion should not be understood as a form of hegemony, but rather as a relationship of complex interdependence between the EU and its cooperating partner countries.

Ann-Kristin Jonasson contributes a chapter on the EU’s promotion of norms in an increasingly conflictual world. In the early 1990s, the European Union was widely portrayed as a ‘normative power’. This narration describes the European Union as an actor that is qualitatively distinct from

others in the global arena due to its value-based foundations and its capacity to shape international norms, such as promotion of democracy and climate action.

However, the promotion of norms is more effective in some areas and regions than in others. A key reason for this variation is that the EU’s interest in diffusing values differs across regions and issue areas. For example, the EU has been relatively successful in promoting climate action in the Mediterranean region, as there is a genuine shared interest in environmental sustainability and survival, but this is largely absent when it comes to the promotion of democratic norms. With regard to the promotion of democracy, such efforts may, at least in the short term, lead to instability and insecurity. Therefore, both parties tend to avoid this instability, particularly as the “...EU has no interest in the migration flows that such a situation would generate” (p. 112). Moreover, the perceived ‘failure’ of democracy promotion is strongly influenced by the absence of key prerequisites for successful norm diffusion, most notably the partner state’s weak commitment to democratic norms.

The author advances two principal recommendations. First, the EU should improve its approach to promote democratic values by adopting a more sensitive strategy that emphasises local understandings of democracy rather than imposing top-down models. Locally rooted interpretations of democratic norms may better integrate diverse segments of local society. Second, the EU should consistently uphold its normative values, even when doing so may conflict with short-term interests. “In the inevitable conflict between interests and values, the latter needs to be

prioritised over short-term interests. The EU needs to genuinely stand by its own values in the norm promotion and work to ensure that the norm-takers also embrace them.” (p. 113)

Pär Hallström examines the extent to which the European Union can project its social market economy model beyond its territorial boundaries. The social market economy, characterised by a blend of competitive markets and robust social protection, is presented as a normative core of the EU's internal economic order. The author argues that the EU's external influence is not limited to trade and regulatory power, but is deeply rooted in its capacity to promote a normative framework based on the rule of law, democratic governance, human rights and social welfare principles. To be more exact, *“Waiting for Godot, the EU is still influencing global neighbours through its soft and economic powers and with law as an instrument in order to make them approach the EU ideals.”* (p. 143) However, the EU's influence is constrained by the competitive presence of alternative models, notably China's state-led development approach, which offers partner countries a non-conditional and investment-driven alternative pattern. Thus, while the EU remains a powerful normative actor, its capacity to shape global economic governance is increasingly contested.

The chapter outlines several mechanisms through which the EU attempts to export its social market economy model. First, through economic integration and trade agreements, thus the EU uses conditionality and rule transfer to encourage partner countries to adopt EU-style standards. Second, the EU leverages its soft power and institutional credibility to shape policy

preferences in neighbouring and developing countries. Third, multilateral institutions and global governance arenas, including the WTO, serve as platforms for diffusing EU regulatory norms.

The ability of the EU to extend its social market economy model is significant, but it is uneven. Its success depends on a few key factors. First, partner countries must be willing to accept and follow EU rules and standards. Second, the European Union needs to stay united and consistent in its policies. Finally, the broader geopolitical situation also matters, especially as global competition between different political and economic models becomes stronger.

Torbjörn Becker and Anders Åslund investigate the EU's dependence on Russian energy. Europe's reliance on Russian energy is not a new issue, it was already prominent in the 1970s, when West Germany wanted to build gas pipelines connecting Western Siberia and West Germany. At the time, the U.S. President Ronald Reagan was unable to stop the initiative and a strong, decades-long energy cooperation was established between Germany and Russia, hence establishing long-term economic dependency on each other. Today, the same issue has returned. As the author articulates the fundamental issue, *“...the differences in the member states' energy balances are a perfect breeding ground for political disagreements within the Union regarding everything from climate goals, taxonomy, and the relationship with Russia, including sanctions”* (p. 151). Subsequently, there is a difficulty in reaching any energy consensus towards Russia after its military action towards Ukraine.

The authors argue that energy savings are necessary, because such measures can help reduce the EU's dependence on Russian energy imports. They caution that a complete cut off from Russian gas would pose major challenges, including potential supply shortages, economic disruptions and the need for rapid development of alternative energy sources.

However, the chapter claims that only a strong cohesion of the European Union can end the dependence on Russian energy and help to convert the continent towards green energy resources. Moreover, the switch of energy suppliers and energy sources within a few years would help to ensure energy independence from the Russian Federation on one hand, while also supporting climate goals and the fight against climate change on the other. *"This is an investment that will yield returns for generations to come in terms of both safety and environmental and climate goals and adds to the credibility of continued sanctions on Russian hydrocarbon-based energy."* (p. 171)

Kjell Engelbrekt discusses a chapter on the European security order. The chapter offers a brief introduction to the evolution and development of the European security architecture since 1946, underlying the key institutions and their role, including the European Union, NATO, the Council of Europe and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. The chapter underlines that two distinct and fundamentally antagonistic security orders have been produced since 2010. According to one understanding, stability is based on military power, great-power politics and *"Russia represents an almost stereotypical illustration of the first-mentioned approach"* (p. 211), while the other approach emphasises

multilateral frameworks, diplomacy and economic interdependence, thereby forming a polycentric security order.

Russia has sought to redefine security arrangements in the Eurasian space through great-power politics, particularly by emphasising its demand for political non-intervention in the former Soviet space, in this way signalling its sphere of interest. Nonetheless, the author underlines some positive consequences of this Russian behaviour, namely *"It bears noting too that the EU and NATO, after decades of friction and mutual rivalry in the area of security, seem to have reached a new consensus as a result of the Ukraine war and their concerted action in 2022–23. This consensus applies not least to the need for an autonomous European conventional military capacity that can be deployed in the continent's immediate proximity."* (p. 217) Consequently, the European Union is compelled to respond to these security challenges by developing a more robust security and defence policy. This includes enhancing usable military capabilities, strengthening strategic stamina and military resilience, and fostering closer cooperation on defence capabilities with industrial partners and academia.

Anders Åslund and Torbjörn Becker write a chapter about a comprehensive European Marshall Plan for Ukraine which aims to guide Ukraine's reconstruction and integration into the European Union. Ukraine's recovery should not merely involve emergency humanitarian aid, but it should be designed as a strategic and long-term economic reconstruction project that is able to accelerate transition of Ukraine toward the EU standards. The authors emphasise that reconstruction must begin as soon as hostilities decrease.

There is a need for a coordinated European framework that avoids fragmented national initiatives and ensures rapid deployment of funds and expertise.

They underline the necessity of a European reconstruction agency, which would be an institutional mechanism that would coordinate aid, manage investments and ensure compliance with EU regulations and anti-corruption standards. The plan should prioritise grant-based assistance rather than loans, in order to prevent Ukraine from falling into debt dependency. Reconstruction efforts should focus on rebuilding infrastructure, modernising energy systems and accelerating the green transition, while also supporting institutional reforms that strengthen governance and the rule of law.

The authors also frame reconstruction as an integral part of Ukraine's EU accession trajectory. The Marshall Plan should be linked explicitly to EU integration, thereby providing political incentives for reform and harmonising economic frame of Ukraine with European markets. The chapter presents the Marshall Plan as both a moral obligation and as a strategic investment in European security and stability.

To conclude, the edited volume of Antonina B. Engelbrekt, Per Ekman, Anna Michalski and Lars Oxelheim 'The *Borders of the European Union in a Conflictual World. Interdisciplinary European Studies*' offers a detailed exploration of how the EU's internal and external policies have evolved in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics, particularly the intensifying clash between the EU and the Russian Federation. The book adopts a clearly pro-integration and

pro-EU stance, emphasising the benefits of deeper political and economic cooperation within the European framework. It presents the European project as the most viable path to stability, development and democratic consolidation in the region. At the same time, the authors take a sharply critical view of the Russian Federation's behaviour since 2014, particularly regarding its actions in Crimea and in Ukraine. The narrative portrays Russia's behaviour as a deliberate challenge to the post-Cold War European security order, undermining the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and peaceful cooperation that frame the EU's external relations. The book also provides valuable insights into the role of the internal market, normative power and institutional cooperation in shaping regional stability and strategic alignment in the post-Soviet space. Therefore, it calls for a strong and unified European response to Russia, emphasising coordinated political, economic and security measures to uphold the European order and to deter further aggression in the neighbourhood.

This edited volume is likely to be of interest to the academic community, especially students and researchers who study European integration processes, the European Neighbourhood Policy, geopolitics, international relations and border studies.

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