

Minutes

Fifth meeting of the group of high-level specialists on the future of Cohesion Policy – Reinforcing territorial cooperation and addressing challenges to European integration

04 July 2023, Brussels

1. Nature of the meeting

The fifth meeting of the group of high-level specialists on the future of Cohesion Policy took place on 4 July 2023. The recording of the public and web streamed session of the meeting is available at https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/how/future-cohesion-policy_en. This session was followed by a non-public discussion between members of the group.

15 members attended the meeting in person and one online.

The Commission services were represented by Peter Berkowitz, Directorate B - Policy, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), Andriana Sukova, Deputy Director-General - Funds, Fair Transition and Analysis, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion (DG EMPL), and Ruth Paserman, Director, Directorate G - Investment, (DG EMPL), accompanied by staff from both DGs.

2. Points discussed

A. Opening remarks

The meeting started with an opening remark from Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, Elisa Ferreira. The Chair, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, introduced the meeting's topic.

Opening and welcome by Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, Elisa Ferreira

The Commissioner welcomed all participants and thanked them for participating in the fifth meeting of the group of high-level specialists on the future of Cohesion Policy. The Commissioner emphasised the importance of the discussion to a possible revision of Cohesion Policy. The recommendations will feed into the reflection process on Cohesion Policy post 2027 and drafts of the 9th Cohesion Report for the beginning of 2024.

The focus of the fifth meeting was on how to support regions and communities separated by a border. Borders often represent scars from past events and need to be softened for communities who live in their proximity to fully benefit from the economic and social opportunities that might be limited by the border. The importance of cooperation between cross-border regions has been highlighted by the recent pandemic, as for many communities, the nearest hospital to them was one across the border. Facilitating cross-border cooperation to address specific bottlenecks and provide solutions to problems has been achieved through the EU in the past but solutions for cross-border problems are not always easy to find. Other instances highlighting the importance of cross-border cooperation are natural disasters, where there is clear need for better cooperation, given the emergency and the need to act effectively on both sides of the border. Commuters and cross-border workers are also highly affected by the administrative issues generated by borders. Differences of legal and organisational nature should be softened, although this is not easy. Member States are not always open to change nor do they adapt easily

and quickly to improve the lives of cross-border citizens. It is important to support border areas citizens also enabling thus the functioning of the internal market.

The Commissioner announced the presentations by academics Eduardo Medeiros and Hynek Böhm, as well as by representatives of institutions, Wiktor Szydarowski (ESPON) and Martin Guillermo-Ramírez (AEBR).

Welcome and introduction by Andrés Rodríguez-Pose

The Chair of the Group, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, welcomed Commissioner Ferreira and all participants.

Borders have divided people for centuries and have been a source of conflict. The EU has changed things for the better, helping transform borders from barriers into bridges communicating populations in Europe. Though borders still divide us, they are less important than before. Border regions face different challenges and need solutions that go beyond the national realm. There is a need to reflect on how to address the problems of border regions and help transform existing barriers into bridges.

B - Academic Inputs

The ‘Academic Inputs’ session included two presentations, each followed by a discussion.

Eduardo Medeiros, invited academic expert (Geography Professor and Researcher, DINAMIA'CET-IUL, Lisbon University Institute):

‘Reinforcing Territorial Cooperation and addressing challenges on European Integration’

The following questions were addressed:

- What kind of additional instruments should be introduced to tackle persistent cross-border obstacles?
- Should cooperation be further incentivised by including it in mainstream Cohesion Policy programmes? How?
- Should there be an enhanced strategic framework through joint strategies for addressing transnational challenges (economic globalisation, climate or demographic change)?

Interreg is the key EU instrument to tackle persistent cross-border and transnational obstacles and achieve European territorial integration and cohesion. Legal and administrative barriers mostly relate to differences, including in social security, pensions and taxation. In addition, the lack of recognition of degrees and qualifications is a key cross-border obstacle. Moreover, a lack of physical access, as well as economic, social and cultural disparities are also critical cross-border barriers.

To tackle persistent cross-border obstacles it is important to change from cross-border/transnational cooperation into cross-border/transnational bottom-up planning and increase territorial integration by reducing border barriers. There are different instruments to tackle cross-border obstacles. The EU b-solutions initiative was introduced in 2018 to identify legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border cooperation and promote sustainable methods to resolve these. EU b-solutions seem an ideal EU policy instrument to reduce legal administrative

cross-border and transnational barriers. A European transnational public transport mechanism (ETPTM) could offer a legal solution to mitigate legal-administrative barriers to the functioning of cross-border public transport. A potential solution to mitigate cross-border language barriers could be a European transnational language mechanism (ETLM) that enforces English as an official secondary language for public information in all Member States, accompanying information in the national language(s). Lastly, a European transnational mechanism (ETM) could offer a legal structure, which could normalise legislation and regulations across all EU Member States without any territorial limitation. The need for a shift from cross-border/transnational cooperation to border/transnational bottom-up planning was highlighted. In addition, cooperation needs to be further incentivised in mainstream Cohesion Policy programmes. Other programmes promoting territorial development should be integrated into Interreg programmes, especially under a financially enlarged Interreg B, as an intermediate step to a fully integrated European territory.

Professor Medeiros presented recommendations to improve territorial cooperation for Interreg A, B, C and D. The strategic orientation of Interreg A should be to reduce border obstacles and mobilise the territorial capital of border regions with an emphasis on green development and border cities. The strategic orientation of Interreg B needs to focus on transnational projects that can foster transnational development potential for physical access, river and sea basin management, innovation networks, renewable energy production, balancing socioeconomic development, polycentric urban networks, as well as promoting green and urban development. Interreg C should maintain its strategic orientation and implementation process, increase financial support and favour intercity cooperation between medium-sized towns. Interreg D requires further analysis.

Finally, there is a need to enhance the strategic framework through joint strategies to address transnational challenges such as economic globalisation, climate and demographic change.

Key issues discussed

The discussion following the presentation involved László Andor, John Bachtler, Riccardo Crescenzi, Jasna Gabrič, Karl-Heinz Lambertz, Joaquim Oliveira Martins, Petr Osvald, Sari Rautio, Andreea-Alexandra Scioşteanu and Helga Trüpel.

The first concern raised was about the challenges of shifting to cross-border/transnational planning. The planning system is different in each country and transnational planning could raise a huge number of issues. Secondly, the possibility of incentives for cooperation was raised. In addition, the importance of having a different approach to different regions was highlighted. Moreover, the future enlargement of the EU could affect the post-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF) making cross-border cooperation even more significant. The importance of Interreg programmes is that they directly involve local communities and enhance the quality of life in border regions. Furthermore, the need to have better quantitative evidence of Interreg's impact to convince a sceptical audience was mentioned. The question of typologies of border regions and target priorities was brought up. Finally, more data on cross-border cooperation is needed.

Hynek Böhm, invited academic expert (Associate Professor, Regional and Social Development, Technical University of Liberec)

Reinforcing territorial cooperation and addressing challenges to European integration

Borderlands are home to one-third of Europeans: strengthening cross-border and interregional cooperation could have important implications for the lives of a significant share of EU citizens. The pandemic highlighted the difficulties of having to cross national borders for work, education, healthcare and other services. Interreg is a key instrument promoting de-bordering, multilateralism and effective re-scaling. The presentation brought to the fore how Interreg programmes can strengthen cohesion in both its economic as well as ‘ideational’ meanings.

The estimated costs of imperfect European integration due to borders have been calculated at EUR 458 billion, some 3% of GDP in Europe and 9% for land border regions. Furthermore, it means the loss of more than 6 million jobs, which is 3% of total European employment and 9% for land border regions. The complexity and cross-disciplinary character of cross-border cooperation (CBC) can be explained by combining five principle dimensions contributing to cohesion: multi-level governance, regional development, cooperation and trust.

Professor Böhm presented a short overview of the literature in the field. Van Houtum categorised three approaches to the study of cross-border integration: cross-border flows, cross-border governance structures and their impact on reciprocal links as well as trust among border residents. Based on these, Durand and Decoville identified six principal macroregional cross-border integration patterns. Differences among territorial models of cross-border integration call for the careful tailor-made application of place-based approaches, as cross-border flows vary greatly from one area to another.

Interreg should address not only economic cohesion, but mainly ‘ideational’ cohesion because ‘ideational’ convergence will contribute to economic convergence. Interreg should keep its actors active and bring in new ones, especially those capable of being multipliers.

Special regimes on external borders need to be reflected in Interreg programmes. The new reality of EU regions bordering Russia and Belarus requires special attention, given the considerably reduced potential for using the border as a resource. These regions need support from mainstream programmes to adapt to the new geopolitical and border realities.

To conclude, local actors involved in cross-border cooperation should make greater use of place-based approaches. Regions with the potential to become cross-border functional areas should identify their specific development needs and consider preparing cross-border or border-sensitive Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs). Moreover, to expand the use of place-based approaches, it is necessary to eliminate thematic concentration within Interreg programmes as this limits development opportunities in some areas. The emergence of functional, soft cross-border places can help increase the quality of life where national investment covering just one part of the border would be too costly. A bottom-up approach needs to be complemented by the top-down management of interventions. Simplified schemes, especially in people-to-people interactions, should be encouraged.

The key importance of Interreg programmes is their contribution to cross-border cohesion. This narrows the mental distance between Europeans, allowing them to benefit from mutual complementarities. Interreg programmes should continue to prioritise capacity building in cross-border institutions because the quality of cross-border governance can influence the quality of life in borderlands. To enhance cross-border integration, it is necessary to look for new actors. Lastly, it would be important to consider higher allocations for Interreg programmes.

Key issues discussed

The discussion following the presentation involved Pervenche Berès, Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, Karl-Heinz Lambertz, Sari Rautio, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, Zornitsa Roussinova and Andreea-Alexandra Scioşteanu.

The first topic concerned the needs of younger generations in cross-border cooperation. Secondly, the necessity to pay more attention to regions bordering Russia and Belarus was highlighted. Tackling challenges such as climate change, pollution, lack of human rights and democracy requires cross-border cooperation that is now more important due to the current geopolitical challenges.

In this discussion, the importance of Interreg programmes was mentioned again. These programmes enable human-centric actions. They can help regions bypass the national level and engage in direct dialogue with the EU. Moreover, eliminating thematic concentration was mentioned as a potential way forward. In this context, cross-border ITI was suggested.

Achieving synergy between territorial cooperation and other EU policies was emphasised as an important challenge. The key measures to enhance cross-border cooperation are simplification, focusing on small projects and increasing the allocation. To foster future cross-border cooperation new local or regional actors have to be involved (e.g., schools, as well as sports or education associations).

C - Institutional Input

The public session also included presentations by ESPON and AEBR (Association of European Border Regions), followed by discussions.

Wiktor Szydarowski, invited expert (ESPON, Director)

ESPON is an Interreg programme that has been operating for over 20 years. It bridges research and policies, providing territorial analyses, data and policy advice to 27 European Union countries and four partner states (Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway, Switzerland). ESPON supports public authorities to benchmark their country, region or city, identify new challenges and potential, and shape policies for the future.

ESPON has an important role in tackling persistent cross-border obstacles. This includes supporting and financing European-wide studies, analyses and territorial research, providing a European framework for integrated data collection, supporting exchanges on cross-border obstacles and tackling cross-border obstacles in a concerted way. It also counteracts fragmentation by promoting new common public services and other forms of cooperation on borders, while offering smart directionality to encourage a holistic approach to the management of shared resources and sectors critical to cross-border convergence, favouring cross-border public services (CPS) and related regulatory actions. In addition, ESPON strengthens governance in cross-border and new functional areas, promoting new types of and better territorial distribution of CPS, supporting Territorial Impact Assessments for cross-border investments and defragmented data collection on cross-border flows, drivers, trends and patterns.

The role of ESPON in 2021-2027 is to deliver evidence-based knowledge of convergence at internal and external EU borders and territorial governance of cross-border functional areas. It also highlights emerging functional border areas, unexplored cooperation opportunities and potential from physical proximity, citizen perceptions and needs for cross-border integration as well as effective cross-border public services in different types of territories.

Martin Guillermo-Ramírez, invited expert (AEBR, Secretary General)

The Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) was founded in 1971 and works on behalf of cross-border regions by highlighting their role in the political landscape, representing their common interest, enhancing cooperation between border regions across Europe and promoting exchanges of experience, information and solutions to common obstacles. Regional and local authorities are significant for cross-border development.

b-solutions is an initiative offering legal and administrative solutions to obstacles along EU internal land borders managed by AEBR.

Border regions are often left behind, making the positive discrimination an important prerequisite to address their development problems. The European cross-border mechanism (ECBM) could be a legal tool to enhance cooperation along EU internal borders. Cross-border integration needs to be developed further. Programmes that encourage cross-border mobility, such as the Erasmus programme, are important for the development of cross-border regions. There is a need to increase the budget for cross-border cooperation and greater commitments by nation states to develop cross-border areas will be required. The challenge of tackling external borders was noted as imperative.

Key issues discussed

The discussion following the presentation involved Pervenche Berès, Constanze Krehl, Joaquim Oliveira Martins, Petr Osvald, Sari Rautio and Andreea-Alexandra Scrioşteanu.

Firstly, the challenge of collecting data and measuring the impact of cross-border cooperation (e.g., gathering evidence on governance and institutional changes) was highlighted. Secondly, the importance of macroregional strategies and the possibility of learning from this type of experience to enhance cross-border cooperation were mentioned. The coordination of macroregional strategies due to the involvement of many players needs to be further rethought. Thirdly, simplified cost options (SCOs) and the Erasmus programme were suggested as important tools to foster cross-border cooperation in the future. Furthermore, it was pointed out that future enlargement of the EU could influence changes in the next MFF.

The Spain-Portugal cross-border area is a positive example of cross-border cooperation. Small projects and people-to-people initiatives can generate local engagement and help solve cross-border challenges. Capacity building was mentioned as important for the future development of cross-border regions. Increasing the budget was also highlighted.

E - Key discussion points of the internal session

The internal session as an open discussion addressed (a) further issues concerning territorial cohesion, (b) proposals for key messages in the final report of the group, and (c) procedures and steps to draft the final report.

Territorial cooperation

There is a considerable variety of border and cross-border areas in the EU. They face different obstacles and have different cross-border potential. Future enlargements of the EU will increase diversity. Consequently, there can be no one-size fits all approach or single thematic focus for cross-border cooperation.

Territorial cooperation is not limited to cross-border cooperation. It comprises all forms of Interreg programmes, including transnational-, interregional- and outermost-region-cooperation, macro-regional and sea basin strategies, as well as embedding cooperation in national and regional cohesion policy programmes.

The success and importance of territorial cooperation needs to be better analysed and documented in quantitative terms. This analysis could also build on more innovative data sets than standard regional data.

Key messages

The discussion of possible key messages on the future of Cohesion Policy concentrated mainly on the rationale and justification of Cohesion Policy and possible regional typologies for the definition of interventions.

Complementarities between Cohesion Policy and other policies are important to the rationale of Cohesion Policy. It is also crucial to address the social dimension of cohesion as well as the equity and equality of opportunities embedded in the European growth model. Cohesion Policy should help that people can live and work where they are (or want to be), enabling them to make their own decision to stay or move, without being forced and not disadvantage people depending on where they are. Other important issues concern links to the Single European Market, forthcoming EU enlargements and proportionality.

3. Conclusions/recommendations/opinions

National borders between EU – and EEA/EFTA – countries still pose barriers to development and integration. This especially concerns cooperation between places in and outside the Schengen area. National borders between EU (and EEA/EFTA) countries and other (external) countries pose particularly strong barriers and increase the volatility of changes. The lack of cross-border integration is costly, especially where cooperation has less of a legacy and is more difficult for various reasons.

Territorial cooperation – the discussion focused on cross-border cooperation – is essential to reducing border obstacles and strengthening EU integration. Current EU instruments with true bottom-up approaches often focus on people-based or people-to-people initiatives. Opportunities for local involvement even of small players, such as local authorities, generate local engagement and ownership. Territorial cooperation can empower local and regional players by improving administrative capacity as well as the quality of government and governance in an area. Therefore, territorial cooperation is well perceived in territories and provides a sense of European belonging.

However, territorial cooperation also requires administrative and institutional capacity. Many successful examples involve cross-border institutions/governance bodies.

Due to this diversity of cross-border cooperation, there can be no one-size fits all approach or single thematic focus for cross-border cooperation. This also needs to be reflected in incentives for territorial cooperation. Common visions and objectives for a cross-border area help to identify strategic cooperation areas and strengthen regional cross-border identities.

Beyond strengthening cross-border cooperation, more attention should be given to interregional cooperation allowing local and regional players to cooperate with peers elsewhere in the EU and possibly even beyond. This is particularly important, as the involvement of the public, civil society, academics and other players in Interreg is part of its success.

4. Next steps

The group has four more meetings scheduled up to December 2023, each with an established agenda. All information about these meetings will be published on the group web page: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/how/future-cohesion-policy_en

Next meetings

Sixth meeting	14 September 2023	Anchoring financial support from the policy in reforms, in the context of the European Semester and in synergy with other EU policies
Seventh meeting	10 October 2023	Increasing policy effectiveness through renewed conditionality mechanisms
Eighth meeting	14 November 2023	Revisiting the delivery mode/ mechanics taking into account priorities
Ninth meeting	14 December 2023	Enhancing the policy capacity to respond to sudden shocks and crises

List of participants

Speakers:

- Ferreira, Elisa – Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms
- Medeiros, Eduardo – Geography Professor and Researcher, DINAMIA'CET-IUL, Lisbon University Institute
- Böhm, Hynek – Associate Professor, Regional and Social Development, Technical University of Liberec
- Szydarowski, Wiktor – Director, ESPON
- Guillermo-Ramírez, Martín – Secretary General, AEBR

Members of the high-level group:

In person:

- Andor, László
- Bachtler, John
- Berès, Pervenche
- Crescenzi, Riccardo
- Dulkiwicz, Aleksandra

- Gabrič, Jasna
- Krehl, Constanze
- Lambertz, Karl-Heinz
- Oliveira Martins, Joaquim
- Osvald, Petr
- Rautio, Sari
- Rodríguez-Pose, Andrés
- Roussinova, Zornitsa
- Scrișteanu, Andreea-Alexandra
- Trüpel, Helga

Online:

- Finn, Alva