

THE LABORATORY DIMENSION IN CROSS-BORDER DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM THE CZECH-GERMAN BORDER REGION

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Abstract: Europe's internal border regions are often referred to as the 'laboratories of European integration'. There are still many barriers along these borders that can potentially be overcome through successful cross-border cooperation. We address the laboratory dimension of cross-border cooperation in a two-stage Delphi survey with experts from the Czech-German border region.

First, our results show that certain laboratory functions are essential for the Czech-German border region. Problem-oriented testing in everyday life and learning from best practice examples of other border regions seem to be a key for cross-border development. Second, 'classical' cooperation topics such as people-to-people projects or tourism work quite well. In contrast, the 'big' issues, such as transport or health services, seem to be rather challenging. Third, we see that formal cross-border sectoral planning or further cross-border regional harmonization could intensify the cross-border development. Our results are based on the project "Cohesion in border regions" (CoBo) which is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

Keywords: border studies, cross-border cooperation, cross-border integration

JEL Classification: C83, O18, O19, R58

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, cross-border interlinkages have increased significantly in many intra-European border regions. Cross-border commuters, institutions and infrastructure projects are only a few examples for spatial integration processes (Decoville & Durand, 2019; Turner et al., 2022; Zumbusch & Scherer, 2015). Against this background, border regions are also referred to as 'laboratories of Europe', as this is where the European idea is most evident (European Commission, 2021). However, border regions have been severely affected by border controls and closures in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. The Schengen Agreement was suspended at numerous borders and cross-border flows were strongly restricted (Chilla et al., 2022; Gareis & Kurnol, 2023; Guillermo Ramírez, 2022; Medeiros et al. 2021; Weber 2022). This crisis came along with many negative implications, but the COVID-19 crisis also opens opportunities for cross-border cooperation (cf. Dittel, 2023; Hippe et al., 2022; Kajta & Opitowska, 2021; Weber et al., 2021). Political attention for border-related issues has increased, new communication channels have been created, and the need for strong socioeconomic integration has become more prominent. Thus, lessons from the crisis need to be effectively addressed to strengthen resilience in times of polycrisis.

In the field of cross-border integration, the Interreg program has played a prominent role in recent years with rather substantial budgets made available for cross-border activities. Nevertheless, it is evident that cross-border barriers still strongly affect cross-border integration (Chilla & Lambracht, 2022; Durand et al.,

2020) that cannot be removed by Interreg based cooperation. Especially during the COVID-19 crisis, differences in the legal system and different responsibilities in public administration became apparent. This results from so-called (multi-level) mismatches between two nation states (Chilla et al., 2012; Opiola & Böhm, 2022). In addition, language barriers and differences in the education system hamper integration (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018). Furthermore, in the area of infrastructure in border regions, different planning systems 'clash' and accessibility is lower in the cross-border context compared to domestic regions (Bertram et al., 2023; Cavallaro & Dianin, 2020; Chilla & Heugel, 2022).

Against this background, this article addresses the following research questions:

- I. To what extent is the Czech-German border region a laboratory of European integration in times of polycrisis?
- II. Which topics are conceived as more successful or rather problematic in the Czech-German cross-border cooperation?

Our research results provide arguments on the future development of border regions and cross-border cooperation. The results of a two-stage Delphi survey with numerous border regional experts from the Czech-German border region allow conclusions to be drawn about the concept of cross-border integration.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Cross-border cooperation

Inner European border regions have a crucial impact on the daily lives of many people and are characterized by an immense diversity of economic, political, cultural and social dimensions (Du-rand & Decoville, 2020; Hippe et al. 2023; Jakubowski, 2020; Jakubowski & Wójcik, 2023). In this context, the border itself can act as a powerful 'resource', fostering numerous cross-border linkages and leading to innovative processes in border regions (Cappellano et al., 2023; Sohn, 2014). To enable these cross-border flows, open borders and the free movement of people and goods are essential (Hippe et al., 2022; O'Dowd, 2002). The introduction of the European Single Market and the Schengen Agreement have facilitated a large number of such linkages and consolidated them by reducing transaction costs (Havlíček et al., 2018).

Despite this progress, border studies point to still persistent obstacles for cohesion in European border regions (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018). Due to different legal systems, there is often a 'multi-level mismatch' at borders, which poses significant challenges for joint cross-border solutions to existing problems due to different responsibilities on both sides of the border (Chilla et al., 2012). Examples include difficulties in transporting patients across borders due to a lack of harmonization, and the debate on teleworking by border commuters during and after border closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2017; Bruurs, 2023). In addition, 'mental borders' and language barriers continue to complicate daily life in European border regions (European Commission, 2016).

Moreover, road and rail infrastructure in border regions is often insufficient, resulting in longer travel times and distances for cross-border interactions (Christodoulou & Christidis, 2019). The process of improving cross-border accessibility is still ongoing, as many border regions suffer from the so-called tunnel effect, where connections cross the border bypass the actual border area (Bertram et al., 2023). In addition, morphological features linked to borders, such as mountains, rivers, and coasts, can pose geomorphological barriers to cross-border cooperation (e.g., Chilla & Heugel, 2022; Klatt & Herrmann, 2011). Longstanding challenges to cross-border coordination have been exacerbated by the recent partial reintroduction of border controls, leading to increased Euroscepticism and signs of 'rebordering' (Durand et al., 2020; Schimmelfennig, 2021).

In European border regions, the importance of cross-border cooperation is becoming increasingly apparent. Such cooperation is a central part of the European integration process, but often faces complex obstacles (Caesar & Pallagst, 2022). Cross-border cooperation does not have formal political mandates for harmonization or large investments. By long-term cooperation efforts, however, existing barriers

and frictions can be eased and managed. The success of such cooperation depends on common interests, political opportunities, local actors and effective multilevel governance (Wong Villanueva et al., 2020; Zumbusch & Scherer, 2015). Governance in this context can be understood as a cross-border network of politics, administration, business and civil society (Bufon, 2011; Kramsch & Mamadouh, 2003). Cross-border cooperation initiatives aim not only to overcome administrative or cultural boundaries, but also to create cross-border benefits in different sectors (Scott, 2015). This leads to institutional ambiguity from informal working communities at the local level to large macro-regions (Kaucic & Sohn, 2021).

In Europe, the idea of 'soft spaces' with blurred borders has developed, supported by cooperation programs (Allmendinger et al., 2014; Purkarthofer, 2018, González-Gomez & Gualda, 2020). The focus is on cross-border spatial development, coordination and mutual learning (Metzger & Schmitt, 2012). Border regions are thus part of European spatial development and play a key role in cross-border spatial planning (Purkarthofer, 2016). Due to the non-governmental nature of cross-border cooperation, strategic spatial planning and cross-border spatial development concepts are crucial, often referred to as 'storytelling' (Caesar & Pallagst, 2018). A sustainable cross-border planning dialogue involving economic partners and municipalities is fundamental (Purkarthofer, 2016).

The basic prerequisite for cross-border cooperation is the ability to interact across open borders (Blatter, 2004). However, in times of crisis, divergent interests can lead to hindered or suspended cooperation (Kajta & Opitowska, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic shows that crises can reduce the means for collaboration and lead to closed borders (Böhm, 2021; Medeiros et al., 2021; Lara-Valencia & García-Pérez, 2021). The basic prerequisite for cross-border cooperation is the ability to interact across open borders (Blatter, 2004). However, in times of crisis, diverging interests can lead to hindered or suspended cooperation (Kajta & Opitowska, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic shows that crises can reduce the means for cooperation and lead to closed borders (Böhm, 2021; Medeiros et al., 2021; Lara-Valencia & García-Pérez, 2021).

A strategic perspective is crucial to identify border-specific needs and specific tools to address problems (Prokkola, 2019). Multilevel, cross-sectoral, and long-term approaches are important, and border regions serve as 'laboratories of European integration' (Kolossoff & Scott, 2013; De-coville & Durand, 2019).

1.2. The Czech-German border region

The reflection on the Czech-German border area has to consider the historical background as well as the current socioeconomic and institutional setting.

In contrast to many other European border regions, cross-border integration was only possible after the fall of the Iron Curtain. After Czechia's accession to the EU, cross-border integration intensified toward a well-integrated economic area. Nevertheless, cross-border cooperation is still quite young compared to Germany's western borders (Bloßfeldt, 2022; Chilla & Sielker, 2022; Hippe & Chilla, 2021). The institutionalization of the Czech-German Euregios follows a bi-/multilateral logic as, for example, a joint cross-border office is not established which is different from most Euregios on Germany's western border. Each Euregio is a separately registered national association (Chilla et al., 2023). This is also different in the German border regions at the western borders where most of the Euregios are jointly institutionalized and some of them already have the status of a European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), which establishes a joint legal personality (cf. Evrard, 2016). An advisory board for cross-border cooperation with the Czech Republic was founded under the coordination of the Bavarian Minister for European Affairs in 2023 (Bayerische Staatsregierung, 2023). However, so far only Bavarian institutions are involved in this process, so that there is still potential in cross-border terms. During the COVID-19 crisis, there were also considerable Eurosceptic tendencies on the Czech side, which made cross-border development more difficult (Novotný, 2021; Novotný & Böhm, 2022).

The Czech-German border region is of predominantly rural character. The situation is also hampered by the geomorphological conditions along the border, including a series of middle mountain ranges (e.g. Elbe Sandstone Mountains, Ore Mountains, Bavarian Forest and Šumava). These topographical features lead

to barrier effects of the rail and road infrastructure (Bertram et al. 2019). From an economic point of view, however, this results in tourism potentials, so that the tourism sector is considered to be of great importance (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). The border region is surrounded by large cities and metropolises to a certain extent. This results in opportunities for connectivity, but also the danger of the so-called tunnel effect, with cross-border interaction taking place mainly across the border region (De Boe et al., 1999; Topaloglou et al., 2005).

On both sides of the border, many regions are confronted with a declining population, an aging population, and a shortage of skilled workers (cf. Stoffelen et al., 2017). The aforementioned issues are stress factors in the resilience discourse and can weaken a region's resilience, creating risks for future crises (cf. Hippe et al., 2023; Prokkola, 2019).

2. METHODOLOGY

The empirical work originates from the research project 'BMBF CoBo (Cohesion in border re-gions)', which examines the cohesion in all border regions with German participation. We applied a two-stage Delphi survey to analyze future development options for the German border regions. In this article, we present several results for the Czech-German border region. The methodology of the Delphi survey has also already been referred to in Hippe et al. (2022).

The Delphi approach is a systematic multi-stage survey aiming to identify future developments and pathways (Evrard et al., 2014), which uses interviews in an established method based on successive rounds of expert opinions for future-oriented problem-solving (Wolf, 2017). The process also involves a written, structured consultation building on the findings of the previous survey (Häder, 2014). Our Delphi survey included qualitative and quantitative elements using multiple-choice and open-ended questions, while elementary parts of the questionnaire aimed to identify and discuss future developments and policy options for border regions with German participation. The first round was conducted from December 2021 to January 2022, the second from June to August 2022. For the first survey, a total of 54 experts in the Czech-German border region were contacted, of which a total of 24 participated (response rate: 44%; 10 Czech and 14 German experts). For our cross-border Delphi approach, we defined an expert as a person key to cross-border cooperation (i.e., Euroregion president/director, ministerial representatives, sectoral stakeholders, Inter-reg stakeholders, and 'visionaries'). The proportion of male participants is 58%, and that of female participants is 42%. For reasons of confidentiality, the affiliations of the experts are not presented in detail.

For the second round, only participants of the first survey were contacted. The second survey built on the findings of the first survey, allowing for validation and forward-looking in-depth analysis of the results from the first round. A total of 16 experts participated in the second survey (response rate: 67%). We evaluate the results for the Czech-German border region individually to examine border region-specific obstacles and future paths.

The survey and the article do not claim to be representative. Nevertheless, the study shows an interesting picture of opinions and allows conclusions to be drawn about cross-border cooperation in the Czech-German border region.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Border regions as laboratories of European Integration?

In the first Delphi step, we asked the experts, '*Border regions are often named "laboratories of European integration". To what extent do you agree with this statement?*' to get their opinion on border regions as laboratories. Participants could select 'don't agree at all', 'somewhat disagree', 'somewhat agree', 'fully agree' or 'don't know'. Furthermore, they could comment their answers. The responses are shown in Figure 1. It illustrates the results for all German border regions (n=102) and the specific responses for the Czech-

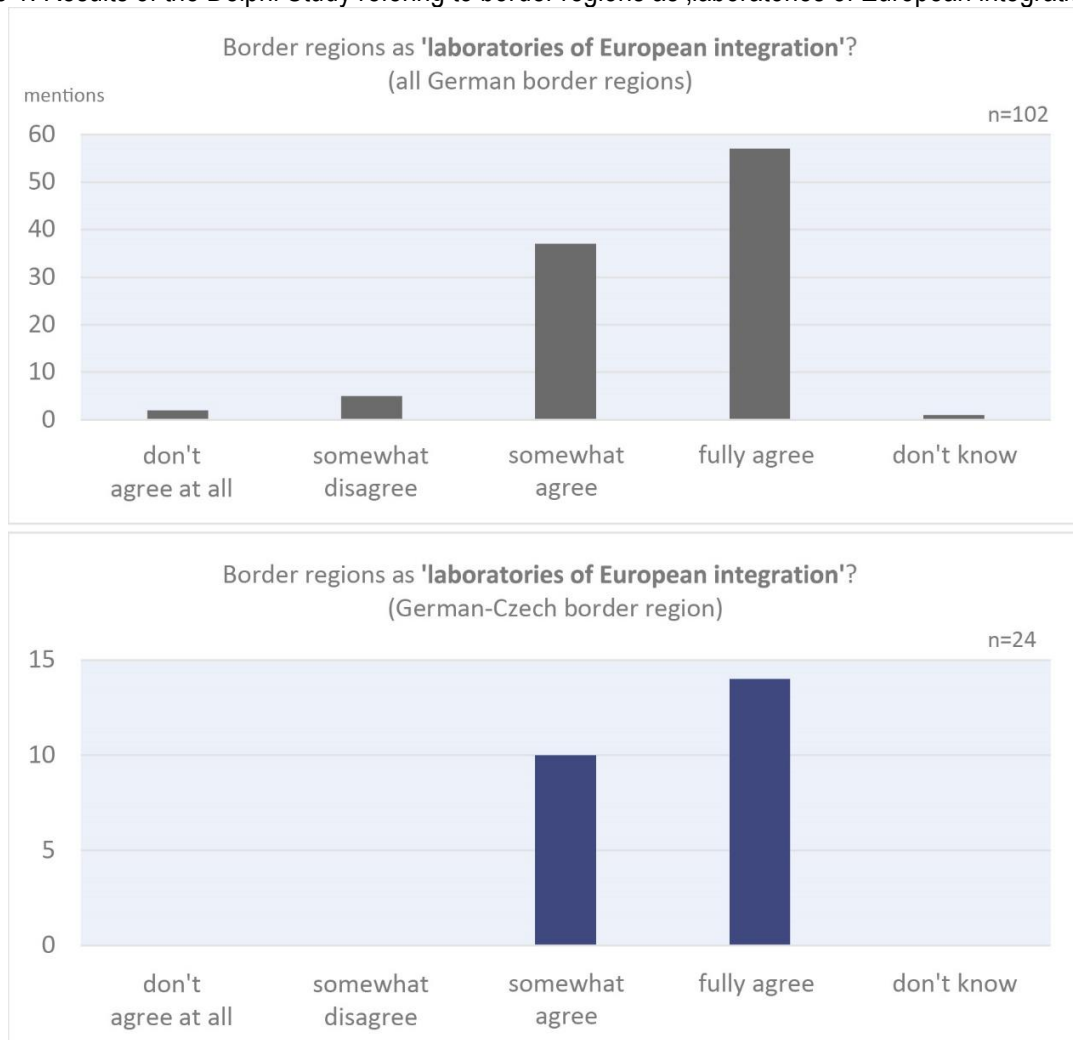
German border region. The overall picture shows that the majority of experts in all German border regions agree with the statement to describe their border region as a 'laboratory of European integration'. For the Czech-German border region (n=24), all participants agreed the statement and see border regions in some way as laboratories of European integration. In the open answers, the experts justified their answers, for example:

“Over the past 30 years, border regions have increasingly developed into interlinked areas. Structures that establish themselves in border regions thus ultimately also contribute to deepening the interconnectedness between neighbouring countries and promote the development between neighbouring countries and promote European integration”.

Another expert explains his choice with the following statement:

“Border regions are interfaces between EU-member states and therefore particularly faced with the full range of integration topics.”

Figure 1: Results of the Delphi Study referring to border regions as 'laboratories of European integration'



Source: own processing, BMBF CoBo, Delphi Study 2022

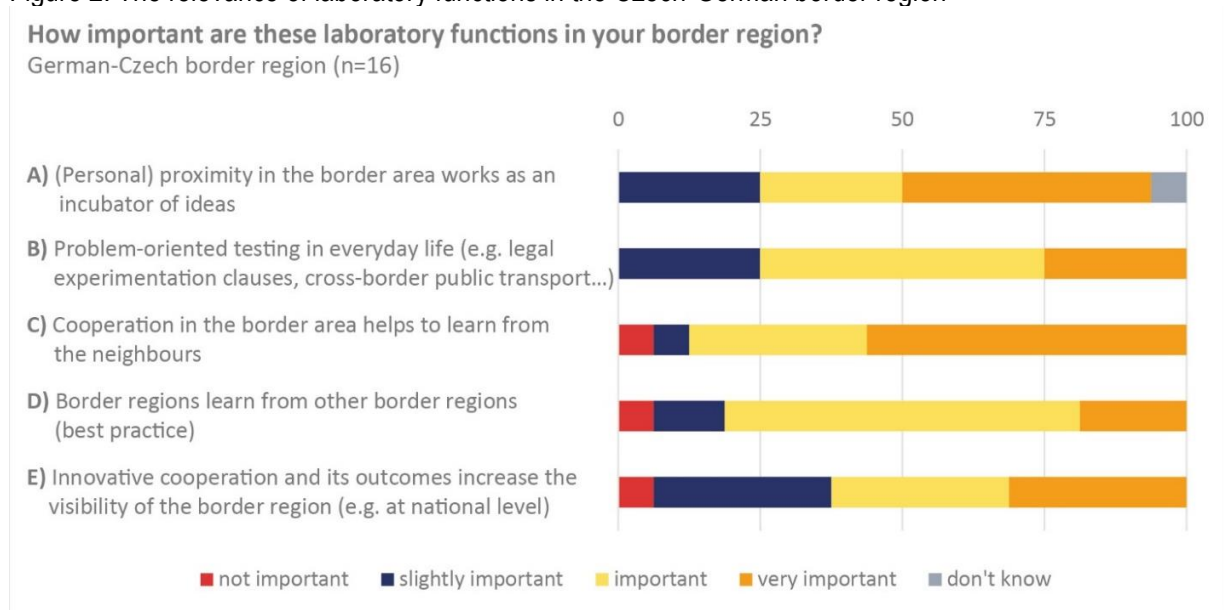
Moreover, the open answers reveal laboratory functions, which are important for border regions. After the analysis of all responses of the first Delphi step, we concluded five laboratory functions of border regions:

- a. The (personal) proximity in the border area works as an incubator of ideas
- b. The function of problem-oriented testing in everyday life (e.g. legal experimentation clauses, cross-border public transport projects)
- c. Cooperation in the border area helps to learn from the direct neighbours (small-scale cross-border best practice function)
- d. Border regions learn from other border regions (large-scale best practice function)
- e. Innovative cooperation and its outcomes increase the visibility of the border region

Thus, we asked in the second Delphi step, 'How important are these laboratory functions in your border region?'. Participants could select 'not important', 'slightly important', 'important', 'very important' or 'don't know' for each option.

Figure 2 shows the results for the Czech-German border region. According to the experts, the most important laboratory function in their border region is 'Cooperation in the border area helps to learn from the neighbours (small-scale cross-border best practice function)', closely followed by 'Border regions learn from other border regions (large-scale best practice function)'. Both functions support the exchange between regions and the mutual benefit from existing knowledge. In contrast to the other functions, according to the experts, the function 'Innovative cooperation and its out-comes increase the visibility of the border region' seems to be of lower importance.

Figure 2: The relevance of laboratory functions in the Czech-German border region



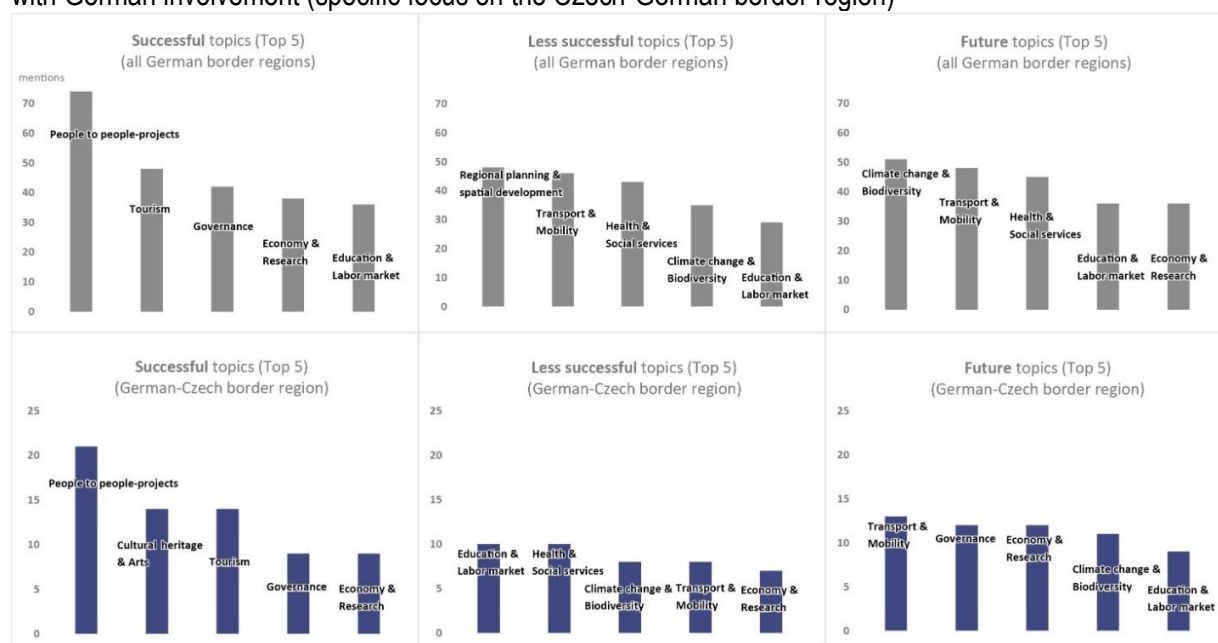
Source: own processing, BMBF CoBo, Delphi Study 2022

3.2. Cross-border topics: Success, Difficulties and Potentials

In the first Delphi step, we asked, 'In which of the following areas is cross-border cooperation in your region particularly successful / less successful? In which of the following areas should cross-border cooperation be intensified in your region?' to measure and operationalize the success, difficulties and potentials of cross-border cooperation. The participants could select up to three options and comment on their answers. The options were the following: 'People to people-projects and intercultural exchange', 'Cultural heritage and arts', 'Governance and partnership', 'Economy, research and innovation', 'Education, training and labor market', 'Tourism', 'Transport and mobility', 'Regional planning and spatial development', 'Climate change and biodiversity', 'Health and social services' and 'Other'. The five most frequently mentioned answers are listed in Figure 3.

According to the experts, the most successful themes in Czech-German cross-border cooperation are 'People-to-people projects and intercultural exchange', 'Cultural heritage and arts' as well as 'Tourism'. It is striking that almost 25% of the responses were on 'People-to-people projects and intercultural exchange'. This is mainly in line with the overall response of the experts in the other border regions with German involvement. In contrast to the overall picture, projects in 'Cultural heritage and arts' seems to be a Czech-German 'success story'. Accordingly, it seems, that the most successful themes are of rather soft or non-controversial character. This contrasts with the responses to the less successful themes. The open answers reveal the reasons for this: Legal differences, different planning systems, high investment costs, geomorphological factors and the political level play an important role in most topics. Even if more cooperation is desired, it is often clear that the issues mentioned are barriers to cross-border cooperation. Some experts also mentioned a lack of interest in cooperation. The topics with the highest future potential are mainly important for the socio-economic development of the border region as transport, mobility, economy, re-search, education and labor market receive the highest responses. The answers also show that environmental challenges and mobility change are relevant in the border regions, as transport and mobility as well as climate change and biodiversity are among the top five responses.

Figure 3: Successful, less successful and future topics of cross-border cooperation in border regions with German involvement (specific focus on the Czech-German border region)



Source: own processing, BMBF CoBo, Delphi Study 2022

The answers of the first round show that existing funding programs and activities (for example Interreg) are useful and important, but may not always be sufficient for the 'hard' topics in cross-border cooperation. Therefore, in the second round we asked 'What do you think is missing in your border region with regard to more difficult topics?' to identify solutions for future cross-border cooperation. Participants could select 'don't agree at all', 'somewhat disagree', 'somewhat agree', 'fully agree' or 'don't know' for each option. Furthermore, they could comment there answers. Figure 4 shows the percentage distribution of the experts' responses.

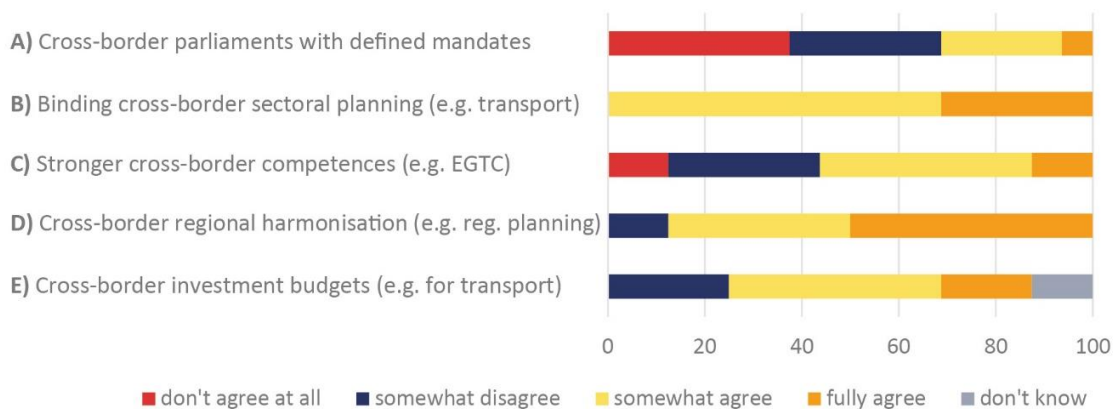
Combining the response options 'fully agree' and 'somewhat agree', the experts see a lack of 'Binding cross-border sectoral planning' and 'Cross-border regional harmonization'. Planning often stops at national borders and the neighbouring region is not taken into account. In the transport sector, for example, this can mean that

a motorway on one side leads to a secondary road on the other. Joint planning as a border region can thus prevent possible barriers. In addition to binding agreements, harmonization processes in various sectors can also reduce border barriers. One example is the recognition of qualifications. About 50% of the experts also agree that there is a lack of 'Stronger cross-border competences' and 'Cross-border investment budgets'. The experts see less potential in a cross-border parliament with defined mandates. This is rejected by almost 70% of the experts.

Figure 4: Missing elements in cross-border cooperation for overcoming the more difficult topics in the Czech-German border region

What do you think is missing in your border region with regard to more difficult topics?

German-Czech border region (n=16)



Source: own processing, BMBF CoBo, Delphi Study 2022

CONCLUSION

Our first research question asks to what extent the Czech-German border region is a laboratory of European integration in times of polycrisis. The interviewed experts tend to see the Czech-German border region as a laboratory of European integration. The border region is seen to have important laboratory functions, which are important tools for overcoming obstacles in particularly difficult cooperation topics, such as transport, health or the labor market. In this way, laboratory functions can support the socio-economic development and resilience of the border region.

Regarding our second research question, addressing sectoral issues in cross-border cooperation, we can conclude the following. In the Czech-German border region, the soft and rather simple topics are quite successful. In contrast, cooperation in healthcare, labor market, education and mobility is still perceived as rather difficult. It seems that cross-border barriers still hamper cross-border co-operation on these topics. This leads to a large potential, in particular with a strategic dimension including laboratory functions. For example, obstacles could be overcome through cross-border regional harmonization or binding cross-border sectoral planning.

Still existing cross-border obstacles result in the risk for border regions being disadvantaged from an economic perspective compared to domestic regions. Difficult topics like e.g. mobility and transport usually involve large investment budgets and strong national interests. Cross-border co-operation therefore always depends on the political willingness on both sides across the multi-level system.

In conclusion, our study has shown that the laboratory character works rather well for the 'softer' cooperation topics. However, 'harder' topics of cross-border development are difficult to be addressed with current instruments. This raises the question if the laboratory function could be extended to more formalized

instruments. A common cross-border strategy for the Czech-German border region would certainly be a helpful instrument for thinking big and paving the way for the 'next level' of cross-border spatial development.

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