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**Bringing Europe closer to citizens. Cross-border  
cooperation and European identity.**

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# **Bringing Europe closer to citizens. Cross-border cooperation and European identity.**

## **1. Introduction.**

Decisions made in Brussels have a broader impact in our daily lives than we usually realize as European citizens. Approximately 80 percent of regulation on Member States somehow originates in the European Union sphere. (Bovens and Yesilkagit, 2004). However a high percentage of European citizens still perceive the EU only as a strange political artifact *sièged* in Belgium, with a complex bureaucracy and well-paid functionaries responsible for changing our currency some years ago. The misinformation about the EU, its importance and its real functioning, has become an even more serious issue nowadays due to the economic crisis, at the risk that it may turn into distrust and rejection towards the integration process with the Euro-skeptical political parties taking advantage of the situation.

Correcting this misperception is fundamental for the Union's future. The European will only reach its real potential involving Member State citizens in the integration project and for this to happen citizens need to feel the European Union as a close, useful reality. The assumption of the European citizenship would allow us to see more Europeanists parties in national Governments and Parliaments, or a high level of participation in the European Parliament elections. Our proposal is the use of cross-border cooperation processes as a tool to bring Europe closer to citizens developing a sense of community beyond the traditional state-nationality identity paradigm. In Spain, and more specifically in some regions like Catalonia, the process of transnational interregional cooperation has been steadily developing, given the federal trait of the country. It would seem to us that the benefits for a citizen from a city situated on the border of a member State if he is able to fulfill his need for public services, medical assistance for example, in a close, easy reachable location, located across the border, rather than in a farther location in its own country, are obvious. But we are aware as well of the complexity of such a process.

This paper proposes the hypothesis that cross-border cooperation initiatives result on sub-state regional integration dynamics that may have a beneficial impact on how citizens perceive the European Union. On a second stage, the socio-economic and cultural cooperation developed by the Euroregions would be to the advantage of the germination of a European identity.

We will first try to briefly describe the roadmap of cross-border cooperation in the European Union, from its beginnings in the fifties to the actual legal and economic framework. The paper

will then focus on the presentation of our central ideas, linking the interregional cooperation system to the approximation of the idea of Europe to citizens through the replacement of the traditional concept of border for a new idea of region cooperation within the European integration process thus contributing to the idea of a real European citizenship. Finally we will present some examples of transnational regional cooperation and verify their involvement on the promotion of a European identity.

## **2. An overview of cross-border cooperation in the European Union.**

Regions located at both sides on an international border often share problems and concerns that are specific to their territories and that they do not necessarily share with the rest of their own countries. Regional and local entities usually face many obstacles while trying to address their central national authorities regarding these issues while cooperation with neighbor territories becomes instead a much more useful resource. This reasoning can be found at the origin of most of the existing cross-border cooperation initiatives.

An overview of the last three decades of the phenomenon may help us understand the concept. We could establish its beginning in 1958, with the creation of EUROREGIO, a cooperation agreement between the border regions of Germany and Netherlands. The agreement opened a twenty years period, until 1980, during which the first experiences were founded within a framework of little formal instruments, non economic support and a large amount of good will from the participating entities. Regional cooperation was supervised by states and it took place through intergovernmental commissions. The difficulties that the international/inter-state dimension posed to these first associations could not be underestimated. The definitive development of cross-border cooperation will come from the involvement of the supranational actors, mainly the Council of Europe and the European Union, the first one focusing in the legal framework and the second one being the essential financial supporter (Perkmann: 2003).

During the eighties, two key documents from the Council of Europe promoted a new framework for these kinds of partnerships, The European Outline Convention of Madrid (1980)<sup>1</sup> and the European Charter of Local Self-Government (1985)<sup>2</sup>. On the next decade cross-border-cooperation initiatives increased considerably and they were provided with a certain legal structure. The definitive relaunch of the process can be dated at the beginning of

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe, *European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities*, Madrid, 21th of May 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Council of Europe, *European Charter of Local Self-Government*, Strasbourg, 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1985.

the nineties when those partnerships, in addition to the legal status, started receiving financial assistance from the EC. In the context of the European Union cross-border cooperation had been an instrument of regional policy since its very beginning in 1973 when the European Union established for the first time a funding instrument aimed to carry out regional development policies, the famous FEDER funds. The benefits that cooperation in border regions obtained from this instrument were still limited until the establishment, in 1990, of a specific program, INTERREG directed to strengthen economic and social cohesion within the territory of the Member States, through cross-border and interregional cooperation. The INTERREG programme provides funding for interregional cooperation across Europe. It is implemented under the European Community's territorial co-operation objective and financed through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The current operational programme was approved in September 2007 and the period for INTERREG IVC will last from 2007-2013. This programme follows on from the INTERREG IIIC programme which ran from 2002-2006. INTERREG IIIC followed INTERREG II, developed during the 1994-1999 perspectives.

Finally it is possible to identify a fourth period starting in 2006. Following these advances the last decades had seen an exponential increase of cross-border cooperation expressions, as well as the development of an institutionalization process with the implementation of the Regulation (CE) 1082/2006 on a European Grouping of territorial cooperation<sup>3</sup> providing cross-border cooperation with a definitive structure and legal and financial support. We will see how far this was materialized given the sharp setback caused by the economic crisis.

### **3. Cross-border cooperation and European identity.**

In line with the development of cross-border cooperation in the European Union as we have explained so far we argue that these initiatives have created a regional integration phenomenon, at a sub-state level, from which it is possible to obtain beneficial dynamics for the attempts to bring population closer to the European Union thus, generating a true European identity. The first argument is that cross-border cooperation can have a relevant role on the process of bringing Europe closer to citizens. The work put in place by regional and local authorities involved in this kind of initiatives allows for the existence of both visible institutions and projects labeled as European that will have a direct impact on people's day to

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<sup>3</sup> Regulation (EC) 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council, of 5 July 2006, on a European Grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC).

day lives. Cross-border experiences tend to focus on primary problems concerning crucial sectors for population such as health or transport, the result being that citizens identify the solutions offered to them as “coming from Europe”. European Union is thus perceived as creating new opportunities that help solving important issues on cross-border areas, issues that in many cases states have been unable or unwilling to solve. This is the case of the most famous manifestation of this cooperation, the Euroregions that “...represent attempts to bring the current abstraction that is Europe, literally, down to “earth”, in so doing materializing Jean Monnet dream of bringing Europe “ever closer” to the future European citizens” (Kramsch and Hooper, 2004:3). At the same time the service is offered to the citizen by the closest authority, the one placed in a better position to satisfy the need in a more efficient way even when this means that the provider will be a foreign institution, generating as well a benefit for Member States.

On a second stage, it is important to bear in mind that the development of a European identity based on a set of common principles and values has long been one among the goals of those in charge of the European integration process. In this sense, the building of a European citizenship is often argued as the cornerstone of the European Union legitimacy, only the spread of a true sense of belonging to Europe within Europeans minds will allow for the social and political process of integration to move forward. And is precisely here, that the integration dynamics on internal borders that come from cross-border cooperation activities can be valuable. O’Dowd considers that cross-border integration processes “appear to promise a more practical and democratic grass-roots form of European Integration than the rather secretive bargaining between elites at the intergovernmental level in Brussels” (O’Dowd, 2002:116).

The idea is that cross-border cooperation creates new communities, making the traditional concept of border, present in the social imaginary, fade away. The conception of the border as an obstacle, a barrier, is replaced by a conception of this inter-state space as a space for cooperation, and in a second stage, by the idea of belonging to a community, a new community of political initiatives, social services, economic growth and cultural activities. (Gualini: 2003) The identification of this new integrated community as being part of the broader European integration, mainly through the funding opportunities offered by European institutions becomes then crucial. And this is a role that concerns not only regional and local authorities involved but also the European Union. The border regions integration process can thus become a great opportunity for the development of a true European citizenship if its potential is fully operated.

#### 4. Some concrete examples.

In order to understand better this entire network of concepts we consider it is important to analyze some concrete examples and try to understand how cross-border cooperation initiatives work. We will then apply to these concrete examples our proposed ideas regarding the effect of cross-border cooperation on the *rapprochement* of Europe and Europeans as well as the building up a true European identity.

The Euroregion Cross-Channel (Transmanche) is quite a particular case. First of all, because of a special element, the sea, an obvious one but nevertheless worth mentioning. Unlike most cross-border regions, that one is not separated by a normal border but by 34 km of water. The relation between the two shores has always been strong but is obviously different from other land borders. Besides, the socioeconomic gap between the two regions is especially relevant. On the British side, the region of Kent, wealthy, developed, and with a high purchasing power. And on the French side we have, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, essentially rural, poorer than its British neighbour and with a high unemployment rate. Even if we are talking about two big, rich and important European States, the gap between those two particular regions is maybe wider than any other Euroregion. Indeed, the main goal of the European Cohesion Policy is to minimize the socioeconomic disparities between its members, so it seems normal to promote that kind of regional partnership. The case of Transmanche includes a remarkable aspect, an element that has dramatically changed the relation between the two sides of the Channel: the Eurotunnel. No other European border has suffered such a radical transformation. Hence, the Euroregion is entirely based on that rail connection, beyond some existing maritime relations. A third country is involved in the Euroregion, Belgium, because of the high level of movement of people, mainly the European Union staff. The Eurotunnel represents a concrete example where the outcomes from a cross-border cooperation initiative result on an element clearly identified by Europeans across the Union as being originally “European.”

The second case is the Euroregion Pirineus Mediterrània that was created in 2004 as a project for cooperation between the regions of Aragon, Catalonia, Balearic Islands, Languedoc-Roussillon and Midi-Pyrénées; and became an EGTC in 2009. The main goal of this association is the promotion of the north-west area of the Mediterranean as a focus of sustainable development trough projects based on innovative approaches that would contribute to the social and economic integration of the region. The EGTC is a clear example of sub-national regional integration conceived by the participating regional and local

authorities as a small circle within the big circle of the European integration process. Examples of this approach to interregional cooperation can be found on the objectives of the EGTC within which we can find the priority of “donner une dimension citoyenne à l’Eurorégion” or “contribuir à la construction d’une Europe unie, solidaire et proche des citoyennes”. But the contribution of the Euroregion Pirineus Mediterrània to the development of a European identity is also identifiable in the region’s activities such as the recent initiative of a Erasmus programme for Young Entrepreneurs.

## **5. Conclusions.**

Cross-border regional cooperation in the European Union has been the object of a great development in the past decades, both from an institutional and a practical perspective. The definition of a legal framework that allows these associations to obtain legal personality as well as the funding programmes set out by the European Union gave rise to a swift spread of the phenomenon, almost all regional and local entities located in border territories are now involved in some form of transnational cooperation.

By joining forces with neighbouring actors regions geographically and in some cases politically far away from capital cities and central governments in their countries can solve common problems and tackle common interests in a more efficient. But beyond the direct benefits linked to socio-economical growth these initiatives have the potential to generate regional integration dynamics within the European Integration process. The outcomes of the region activities can be seen by the population as European results. Therefore Euroregions, EGTC and other forms of cooperation should be taken into account as a useful tool on the promotion of a common European identity.

Although some of the current transnational regions have assumed as their own the objective of bringing Europe closer to citizens, most of the experiences so far have limited themselves to the resolution of practical issues concerning their territories and populations on a more direct and sometimes urgent way. Consequently it would be interesting to involve the Euroregions in the process by making them aware of the potential they have on the development of a European citizenship. Some of them experience serious problems on the put in practice of their objectives due to several factors such as different level of political autonomy or imbalance on the available funds from the different participants. The idea of being part of the process intended at bringing the European Union could then become and added value for the Euroregion itself.

The success of this approach mainly relies on the establishment of systems that allow for the labelling of the outcomes of these initiatives as European, while respecting their transnational regional integration identity. It would be of great value the design of concrete programmes to promote the inter-relation of different Euroregions that share common historical experiences or cultural elements, such as past emigration patterns or rural distribution of the population, thus setting the grounds for the awakening of a common identity beyond the concrete border territory. Bringing Europe closer to the citizens is not an easy objective to achieve but sub-national regional integration processes have a great potential that should not be neglected

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