



CROSS-BORDER REVIEW

YEARBOOK 2021



1406 Budapest, Pf. 7.



www.cesci-net.eu



cesci@cesci-net.eu



CENTRAL EUROPEAN SERVICE
FOR CROSS-BORDER INITIATIVES

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. hab. James W. Scott

Professor of Regional and Border Studies
University of Eastern Finland

Cross-Border Review

Yearbook 2021

ISSN 2064-6704

Budapest
2021

Challenges for (Re)building Institutional Trust in Post-Covid European Territorial Cooperation Programmes

Eduardo Medeiros

Introduction

In my almost 30 years of academic experience in following the former EU Interreg Community Initiative, latter on (2007) transformed into one of the main EU Cohesion Policy goals (European Territorial Cooperation). I have heard and read, countless times, in international events and publications, many stating the importance of ‘institutional trust’ to consolidate territorial and, in particular, cross-border cooperation institutional processes. Conversely, a few have remembered how fragile, erroneous and ephemeral is ‘institutional trust’, since it is often dependent on the individual leading this process. Here, it is common to see frequent changes in Interreg programmes’ leadership and key staff members, as well as local and regional institutional leadership with often different perspectives on how to establish cross-border and transnational cooperation processes. In this context, it goes without saying that ‘institutional trust’, if regarded as an essential counterpart of territorial cooperation, adds an extra layer of complexity to this process, thus requiring an insightful examination of its concrete relevance and impacts in boosting or hindering territorial cooperation in all its forms. This is the challenge we propose to discuss in this chapter, which launches the hypothesis that European Territorial Cooperation programmes (Interreg) can play a vital role in rebuilding institutional trust in European cross-border regions, which was greatly affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

How far is institutional trust relevant for cross-border cooperation?

In a general sense, for Devon et al. (2015: 87), institutional trust “refers to people’s expectations of how institutions should treat people and what institutions should deliver based on the definition of the objectives and the principles according to which institutions are expected to function”. The same authors recognise the challenges involved in measuring this process, which, in a business context, is understood as a “perception of the probability that other agents will behave in a way that is expected” (Welter et al. 2008: 1). According to these authors “in a cross-border

Challenges for (Re)building Institutional Trust

Eduardo Medeiros

context, trust might be expected to play a particular important role because of the risks inherent in cross border transactions”, whilst assisting individuals in controlling “risks and reducing the costs connected with each border crossing” (ibid. 1).

Much contemporary research on institutional trust echoes its legal, political, cultural, economic and historical ramifications, supporting the institutional environment (Meyer 2021; Welter et al. 2008). It also acknowledges the importance of systemic institutional trust to “influencing the nature of cross border activities and their development potential” (Welter et al. 2008: 8). For Koch (2018: 591), four different forms of trust can be identified in cross-border cooperation relations: (i) rational-personal decisions; (ii) social-cultural understanding; (iii) general personal interactions and (iv) the historical–institutional environment. This adds to the complexity involved in analysing ‘institutional trust’ in cross-border regions. By referring to the work of Scott (2013), Koch highlights the crucial role of ‘institutional trust’ to ensure the continuation of cooperation activities in border regions, even within challenging geopolitical environments, just like in the current covidfencing environment (Medeiros et al. 2021). This author adds two other complementary advantages associated with the presence of high levels of cross-border institutional trust: (i) it contributes to eliminate the need for complicated institutional measures and procedures which ensure cross-border interaction, and (ii) it helps to forge a high level of cultural awareness from individuals and entities from both sides of the border.

The systematic closing of national borders across Europe, as a result of the spread of the COVID-19 in early 2020, significantly reduced the levels of ‘cross-border institutional trust’, at least between local and regional authorities and border citizens (Golunov & Smirnova 2021; Ikotun et al. 2021; Järv et al. 2021; Radil et al. 2021). For Casaglia (2021), the covidfencing process raised fundamental concerns on issues of spatial and social injustice, as well as unnecessary institutional tensions. As in many cases, covidfencing was “supported by local and regional administrators (van der Velde et al. 2021). Conversely, cross-border entities and commuters brought widespread concerns on the covidfencing effects on border regions’ economy and engaged in concrete initiatives to reopen the borders and to reinstall previous levels of cross-border institutional trust (Medeiros et al. 2021).

Post-covid-19 institutional trust and EU Territorial Cooperation Projects

In the previous section it was possible to conclude that ‘institutional trust’ can be regarded as a barrier to cross-border cooperation if its level is reduced in a certain cross-border area (see Medeiros 2011), alongside many other obstacles, such as accessibility, sociocultural, economic and environmental related barriers (Medeiros 2018). So, how can post 2020 EU Interreg-A programmes contribute to reduce these ‘institutional trust’ barriers in a political mild covidfencing context? One logical policy option would be to channel financial support to already existing cross-border entities (Lange – Pires 2018), which include Euroregions (Medeiros 2011), European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) (Evrard – Engl 2018), border cities (Jurado-Almonte et al. 2020; Medeiros 2021). But ultimately, the European Commission should, in our view, allocate a specific amount of Interreg-A funding to supporting cross-border planning (Durand – Decoville 2018; Medeiros 2014) as a longer-term institutional arrangement to foster cross-border institutional trust.

In the current (2021-27) EU Cohesion Policy framework, there is indeed a concrete objective to facilitate ‘cooperation governance’ (ISO 1: Better Cooperation Governance) which can be directly linked to the policy goal of reinforcing ‘institutional trust’, following from the activities proposed in Article 14, draft ETC regulation (Interact 2020: 6) for the Interreg-A:

- Enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities, in particular those mandated to manage a specific territory, and of stakeholders;
- Enhance efficient public administration by promoting legal and administrative cooperation, and cooperation between citizens, civil society actors and institutions, in particular, with a view to resolving legal and other obstacles in border regions;
- Build up mutual trust, in particular by encouraging people-to-people actions.

As stated in an Interact report (2020: 12) “people-to-people projects usually refer to small projects that bring citizens together – typically, such actions address children, culture, language, sports. The main objectives are getting to know each other and enhancing trust-building”. Both these small scale (financially speaking) people-to-people Interreg-A projects, and flagship ones, directly or indirectly supporting cross-border entities, can contribute to the reduction of obstacles’ Interreg-A (2021-27) policy goal, of removing 1/5 of border barriers in EU border regions. Likewise, the Interreg-A ‘partnership principle’, which invokes a balanced representation from both sides of the border, together with the ‘actions for the citizens’ goal, which supports trust-building as a basis for cooperation in a Europe closer to citizens, can contribute to rebuild institutional trust at several territorial levels via the implementation of EU Interreg-A programmes.

Conclusion

By being, in a multitude of cases, the main financial source supporting cross-border projects in Europe, the Interreg-A programmes have the potential to be a crucial and foundational policy vehicle to impel the rebuilding of cross-border ‘institutional trust’ which has been strongly affected by the covidfencing process. In concrete terms, these programmes can provide further impetus to European cross-border entities which have proved formidable in mitigating initial covidfencing effects that provoked unnecessary chaos in European borders, in particular to cross-border workers. Secondly, these EU programmes could push steadily into supporting the implementation of cross-border planning processes in all EU internal and external borders, as a concrete means to limit future drastic reductions of ‘institutional trust levels’, since these plans would provide a more stable and long-term institutional partnership between all involved border actors and areas. Thirdly, the idea put forward by the European Commission to allocate Interreg-A funding to people-to-people projects has also the potential to reinstall individual and institutional trust in a small, yet crucial scale, of personal border contacts in all ages, via cultural, sports and social activities, that could leave a long-lasting imprint in forging cross-border trust. But, as in all aspects of human life and policy implementation, knowledge and education will eventually influence the degree of ‘intuitional trust’ that will be forged by the current Interreg-A programme, which is to be tested in the next event that will be used to justify the closing of European borders. Only by then, it would be possible to verify the real impact of the EU Interreg-A programmes to foster ‘institutional trust’ in European cross-border areas.

References

- Casaglia, A. (2021): Borders and mobility injustice in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 36(4), pp. 695-703.
- Devon, T., Stroeken, K. and Weyden, P. (2015): Measuring institutional trust: Evidence from Guyana. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 7(3), pp. 85-115.
- Durand, F. and Decoville, A. (2018): Establishing cross-border spatial planning. In: Medeiros, E. (eds.): *European Territorial Cooperation*. Springer, Cham, pp. 229-244.
- Evrard, E. and Engl, A. (2018): Taking stock of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC): From policy formulation to policy implementation. In: Medeiros, E. (eds.): *European Territorial Cooperation*. Springer, Cham, pp. 209-227.
- Golunov, S. and Smirnova, V. (2021): Russian border controls in times of the COVID-19 pandemic: Social, political, and economic implications. *Problems of Post-Communism*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1920839>

Ikotun, O., Akhigbe, A. and Okunade, S. (2021): Sustainability of borders in a post-COVID-19 world. *Politikon*, 48(2), pp. 297-311.

Interact (2020): *ISO 1: Better Cooperation Governance, 01 October 2020, Version 1 Fostering governance in Interreg*. Interact, Vienna.

Jurado-Almonte, J. M., Pazos-García, F. J. and Castanho, R. A. (2020): Eurocities of the Iberian borderland: A second generation of border cooperation structures. An analysis of their development strategies. *Sustainability*, 2020 (12), 6438.

Järv, O., Tominga, A., Müürisepp, K. and Silm, A. (2021): The impact of COVID-19 on daily lives of transnational people based on smartphone data: Estonians in Finland. *Journal of Location Based Services*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17489725.2021.1887526>

Koch, K. (2018): The spatiality of trust in EU external cross-border cooperation. *European Planning Studies*, 26(3), pp. 591-610.

Lange, E. and Pires, I. (2018): The role and rise of European cross-border entities. In: Medeiros, E. (eds.): *European Territorial Cooperation*. Springer, Cham, pp. 135-149.

Medeiros, E. (2011): (Re)defining the concept of Euroregion. *European Planning Studies*, 19(1), pp. 141-158.

Medeiros, E. (2014): Is there a new TRUST in Inner Scandinavia, Evidence from cross-border planning and governance. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 96(4), pp. 363-386.

Medeiros, E. (2018): Should EU cross-border cooperation programmes focus mainly on reducing border obstacles? *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica*, 64(3), pp. 467-491.

Medeiros, E., Guillermo-Ramírez, M., Ocskay G. and Peyrony, J. (2021): Covid-fencing effects on cross-border deterritorialism: the case of Europe. *European Planning Studies*, 29(5), pp. 962-982.

Medeiros, E. (ed.) (2021): *Border Cities and Territorial Development*. Routledge, London and New York.

Meyer, J. (2021): To trust or not to trust? Structures, practices and discourses of transboundary trust around the Swedish nuclear power plant Barsebäck near Copenhagen. *Journal of Risk Research*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2021.1913629>

Radil, S., Pinos, J. and Ptak, T. (2021): Borders resurgent: towards a post-Covid-19 global border regime? *Space and Polity*, 25(1), pp. 132-140.

Challenges for (Re)building Institutional Trust

Eduardo Medeiros

Scott, J. W. (2013): Constructing familiarity in Finnish-Russian Karelia: Shifting uses of history and the re-interpretation of regions. *European Planning Studies*, 21(1), pp. 75-92.

van der Velde, M., Sijtsma, D., Goossens, M. and Maartense, B. (2021): The Dutch–German border: Open in times of Coronavirus lockdowns. *Borders in Globalization Review*, 2(2), pp. 149-153.

Welter, F., Veleva, N. and Kolb, S. (2008): *Trust and Learning in Cross border Partnerships in an Enlarged Europe*. Deliverable 15. Sixth Framework Programme Priority 7 – Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge Based Society, Brussels.

Published by

Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives (CESCI)

European Institute of Cross-Border Studies

H-1067 Budapest, Teréz krt. 13.

www.cesci-net.eu

Editor-in-chief:

James W. Scott

HU ISSN: 2064-6704



The printing of the publication was supported by the
Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.