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# Borders of Bureaucracy: Crossborder Cooperation and its Challenges

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**CHES Research Report, Johanna Mitterhofer, University of Massachusetts Amherst**

## **Borders of Bureaucracy: Crossborder Cooperation and its Challenges**

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*Crossborder cooperation is not an elegant stepping over borders as if they were barely there, but an awkward, jerky scrambling across them. It's this odd process where physical movement across the border has become easy, but the movement of paperwork or administrative procedures over it isn't.*

Author's own reflections, Fieldnotes 18/04/2013

Crossborder cooperation initiatives play a key role in the European Union's delicate balancing act of building a cohesive Europe without threatening the nation-state. Since the 1950s, EU policies have encouraged the creation of economic, environmental, cultural, and technological spaces of interaction across borders to counteract socio-economic divergences between European spaces (European Commission 2008). From transient cultural festivals and virtual business networks to solid transport infrastructure, the spaces 'between states' are celebrated as bridges across the borders of a Europe that continues to be defined by the nation-state.

One of the programs founded and funded by the European Union to overcome social and economic imbalances between European regions is the interregional cooperation initiative Interreg Europe. With a budget of more than €350 million for the funding period 2014-2020, Interreg Europe provides funding for projects, which bring together people from at least two different European states to work toward a common goal. Beyond the individual projects' aims stands the overall objective “to improve the effectiveness of regional policies and instruments”

through “the exchange of experiences among partners who are ideally responsible for the development of their local and regional policies” (Interreg n.d.).

When I embarked on my 5-month fieldwork on the Austrian-Italian border in January 2013, I was interested in exploring how Interreg project managers and other local actors involved in crossborder cooperation initiatives created spaces of cooperation across borders. How were these abstract spaces, announced and celebrated in numerous EU documents, “emplaced” -- that is, lived and experienced locally? What happened to the crossborder initiatives presented in EU-documents when put into practice locally? What were the key issues that slowed down, or even prevented, the creation of a Europe *sans frontieres*? To explore these questions, I interviewed officials involved in the distribution of EU funds in South Tyrol, regional planners, and project managers, sat through meetings and policy conferences, and travelled up and down the region to visit some of the sites of Interreg initiatives.

Surprisingly to me, the single most discussed issue in interviews, meetings, project reports and program evaluations were not actual project ideas or strategies for their implementation, but the various forms of bureaucracy that the crossborder experts, as I came to call them, encountered in their daily work. People repeatedly told me that even in the Schengen area where national borders have lost some of their main functions, crossborder cooperation is severely limited by two main factors: firstly, by the diverse legal, administrative, and bureaucratic cultures that exist in the different countries, and secondly, by the strict bureaucratic requirements of the Interreg projects which take up a great proportion of working time. In short, not physical, linguistic or cultural boundaries, but “borders of bureaucracy”, that is, boundaries (re)created by the multiplicity of documents, forms, signatures, and stamps, were considered key obstacles to interaction and cooperation across borders.

Refuting the claim that borders have disappeared in a globalized world, recent border studies have focused on the multiple ways and novel manifestations in which borders continue to affect the lives and movements of people and things (e.g. Donnan and Wilson 2012, Feldman

2012, Heyman 1998). Within this literature, various scholars have critically examined the power of both borders and bureaucracy to control, exclude and separate, and have examined the uses and abuses of bureaucracy on borders, in contexts such as passport and custom controls, visa applications and asylum courts (e.g. Andreas 2003, Dijkstra & A. Meijer 2011, Fassin 2005, Navaro-Yashin 2007). Other scholars have examined the role of bureaucratic practices/performances (such as audit and accountability checks) and material culture (for instance, forms and binders, but also online databases) in organizing contemporary society. In particular, they highlight bureaucracy's characteristic of being seemingly rational, neutral and objective while indeed being subjective, ideological and irrational (e.g. Shore, Wright and Pero 2009, Strathern 2000).

In my research, I have been drawing on these studies to explore how “borders of bureaucracy” affect crossborder cooperation in various ways as they emerge as important elements of de- (and re-) bordering the European Union. On the one hand, the bureaucratic templates prescribed by the EU seek to streamline divergent administrative practices, thus breaking down national boundaries of practice that might prevent efficient cooperation. On the other hand, these highly time-intensive and complex bureaucratic processes create boundaries that exclude from receiving EU-funding those without the human and financial capital necessary to adequately execute the reporting and audit requirements. Large institutions such as universities or public bodies may thus receive disproportionate amounts of money in comparison to smaller local organisations unable to compete for funds.

### **De-bordering // re-bordering**

The Austrian-Italian border is a Schengen border and as such, has lost many of its most obvious functions: passport controls are rare,<sup>1</sup> customhouses are abandoned, the toll bar has been removed. “The physical border does not exist anymore”, people involved in crossborder projects told me multiple times. Physical movement across the border is, at least for those with EU passport and sufficient financial resources, unimpeded. And even the “border in our heads” that makes “us” different from “them” and that by scholars investigating borders today is often cited as the aspect of “borderliness”<sup>2</sup> (Green 2009) which remains long after the border guards are gone, did no longer matter to most people I talked to.

Yet, the national border does indeed continue to affect borderlanders. It may no longer impede the movement of (European, documented) people or (legal) goods, but it continues to reinforce the “different technological, administrative, juridical, and health care systems” that exist on either side of the border (European Commission 2007: 63). Working or collaborating “across the border” is thus challenging not because it is difficult to work with people speaking different languages, or because it is difficult, time-consuming and expensive to physically get from one side of the border to the other. Crossborder cooperation is challenging because of the divergent administrative or bureaucratic practices and structures, be they different taxation systems or conflicting responsibilities of local government institutions.

Crossborder cooperation programs like Interreg do not ignore these “artificially created administrative barriers” that may hinder cooperation on transnational issues (European Commission 2007: 50). Indeed, in order to ensure accountability, comparability, and quality despite varying national institutional, bureaucratic, and financial cultures, beneficiaries of EU-

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that border patrols have not completely disappeared from Schengen borders (and that hence the discourse of a “borderless Europe” is rather superficial). Police routinely conducts passport controls and car searches to “intercept” illegally imported goods and undocumented migrants.

<sup>2</sup> The term “borderliness” (also border-ness) was coined by anthropologist Sarah Green. The term refers to border as a quality, rather than as an object, and more as ongoing activity, rather than a fixed ‘thing’ (Green 2009).

funds need to adhere to a rigorous and work-intensive documentation process that is broadly the same for all beneficiaries of one programme area, independently from which country. These standardized forms and requirements are part and parcel of the European Union's crossborder programs and are supposed to facilitate the bridging of national borders. Yet, EU documents and requirements function as such bridges only in shape and form. While the forms and guidelines may look the same, the actual practices associated with compiling, assessing and inserting the necessary information vary considerably from country to country.

This became apparent during a meeting of an Interreg project I attended last spring. Project partners from three different regions (two Italian *province* and one Austrian *Land*) were present. The focus of the meeting was to evaluate various project proposals for future crossborder initiatives. Ultimately, however, more than two thirds of the total time were spent comparing and contrasting the various policies conventionally employed by the respective project partners in their day-to-day accounting procedures. Do you pay for expenses upfront or do you refund suppliers at a later date? Do you need to get quotes for items below €500 or not? How many people are you allowed to employ to work at the project? Which public office is the first instance you are accountable to?

According to the project participants, the different practices employed by the partners create tensions within the project: the Austrians could not understand why it takes the Italians so long to do their accounting and vice versa. Because of national guidelines that need to be followed more or less rigidly even in the context of transnational EU initiatives, a lot of time and energy is spent on the “form rather than the content of projects”, or on *how* things are done rather than *what* is actually being done.

An encounter with another crossborder actor elucidates these aspects further:

*“The official objective of our project is to facilitate the cultural and linguistic exchange between Italian and Austrian youth. But what we are actually doing most of the time is trying to figure out how to collaborate amongst us project managers in Italy and Austria! As youth workers, our*

*responsibilities, but also financial and human resources are vastly different and what we can do here in Italy, might be impossible for our colleagues in Austria!”* (Interview with youth worker, 25/02/2013).

While in theory and on paper, Youth Services in both countries focus on similar issues, in practice an Austrian youth worker’s autonomy and responsibilities are far more limited than those of her Italian colleague, making cooperation on an “equal” basis difficult, if not impossible. The aim of the project itself (in this case, youth exchanges) is pushed to the background, at least temporarily, while manoeuvring the different institutional realities and bureaucratic requirements becomes the central objective of the crossborder cooperation.

What I observed during the meeting and the interview were situations where borders often described as having become irrelevant in today’s European Union, were re-emerging in sometimes highly tangible expressions – not, like in the past, in the form of customs buildings, border guards or toll bars, but as signatures, forms, and documents. EU bureaucracy, an instrument which seeks to bridge “artificially created administrative boundaries”, thus leads to a momentary re-bordering of a supposedly crossborder space, creating the context for encounters and clashes in which the nation-state gains salience and visibility.

The project managers I talked to do not see this as necessarily a negative development - after all, it is a necessary step in every successful project. However, this key aspect of the collaborations is rarely recognized. Indeed, the in-depth study of each partners’ institutional and bureaucratic identities; the drafting of best-practice guidelines on dealing with bureaucratic requirements; the ongoing negotiations and compromise-making between project partners that produce, eventually, the pre-condition for the actual project goal, tends to be left out of project reports shared with the media. Rather than as achievements in themselves, they are mentioned as mere by-products or preliminary steps toward the actual, intended, and funded goal. Even more importantly, the stringent project timelines do not allow sufficient space for these necessary negotiations, often requiring project participants to rush through these fundamental

steps of “preparing the ground” -- thus “endangering the success of the entire project”, as one interviewee told me.

It would be too simplistic to label the emergence (or rather, continuing existence) of these borders of bureaucracy as a purely negative development. As the nation-state and its bureaucratic arm continue to reach far into border-crossing initiatives, participants are forced to truly evaluate and define the omnipresent rhetoric of the “Europe without borders” for themselves. This is particularly important in the context of crossborder initiatives such as Interreg, which is deeply rooted in the rhetoric of a borderless Europe. What exactly does it mean to “overcome borders”? Can successful crossborder cooperation happen despite, or precisely because of, the continuing existence of borders?

In grappling with these questions, people actively make abstract ideas of crossborder cooperation meaningful to local contexts. Borders do not need to be absent in order for people to cooperate. Borders do not even need necessarily to be “overcome”. By being acknowledged and made visible in contexts of crossborder interaction, borders can become opportunities for reflection on “the other” and oneself. The meeting described above, for instance, resulted in an in-depth discussion and analysis of bureaucratic “best practices” in the various regions, and in concrete plans to improve institutional practices. This, so the participants hoped, would facilitate not only crossborder cooperation, but also the work carried out on one side of the border. This process of comparison and evaluation of difference can thus transform the national border into an enabling and transformative, rather than limiting or even destructive factor.

### **The Emergence of Internal Borders**

Perhaps more detrimental to the EU’s aim of alleviating inequalities in and across borderlands, is that the time-intensive and complex bureaucratic processes create new boundaries that exclude those without the necessary expertise from engaging in border-crossing initiatives. A range of actors is competing for resources from the Interreg programme: from large institutions



such as universities or local governments to small cultural associations and museums. Their project proposals are evaluated under the same criteria. While the size of an institution certainly does not determine the quality of a project or of its implementation, it does tend to correlate to more institutional resources, both human and financial, that are likely to facilitate the implementation of a crossborder project.

Thus, the administrator of a small local museum will probably find it more difficult to keep up with all the required accounting and documenting than the employee of the Project Management Team of a large research institution whose work focuses exclusively on managing international projects. This puts smaller organisations at a disadvantage in the competition for funding and into a position of considerable stress during the implementation of a project. As one project manager told me: “My heart starts racing when I have to phone the Interreg office. The smallest mistake could cost me a lot of money. I really am scared of all the reports and audits I need to submit”. The person who told me this had been a project manager for years, but this was her first EU-funded project – and most likely, so she said, her last. According to her, even though the Interreg program is often portrayed as being open to smaller projects, it is really geared toward large ones. For smaller organisations to be able to successfully implement an Interreg project, the entire administrative process would need to be streamlined, because: “Right now, all we do is filling out forms, filing reports, and checking numbers! There is no time to sit down with our partners and do the actual work!”

The annual reports of the Italy-Austria Interreg program acknowledge the increasing complexity of the administrative and bureaucratic requirements, and have been recommending a simplification of all administrative processes for the last five years (Provinz Bozen 2011). Yet, little has changed so far. Bureaucratic requirements thus create barriers not between nation-states but between organisations with different human and financial resources. Borders of bureaucracy are not the borders that the EU’s territorial cooperation programmes focus on; yet, they are real, they prevent efficient cooperation, and hence they need to be addressed.

## **Conclusion**

The borderland has been described both as a place of flow, mixing and blurriness, as well as a place where differences are particularly clear and salient (e.g. Berdahl 1999). Crossborder projects share these characteristics. At their core is, indeed, the border -- or, to use Sarah Green's term, "borderliness" (Green 2009) rather than "borderlessness". Despite -- or precisely because of -- the initiative's aim to eventually overcome, ideally remove or at least displace the national border, project actors are forced to confront, and engage with, the differences and disjunctures created by borders. In today's European Union, it is not so much the traditional, physical border between two states that creates these divergences, but rather the borders of bureaucracy. These continue to restrict the movement of people and goods, although restrictions are highly selective, and only marginally affect the EU-funded crossborder projects I have investigated. What does affect these projects is, however, the restricted movement of paperwork and administrative procedures, which remain rooted in regional and/or national bureaucratic cultures, sharply separated by national boundaries. It is these remnants of "the (material) border that once was but is no more" that influence the relationships of actors from, and on, either side of the border. It is thus not ethnicity, culture or language that hinders cooperation -- factors that have traditionally been central to the scholarship on borders -- but rather the vastly divergent bureaucratic languages and institutional cultures. In order to adequately address the difficulties experienced by actors engaged in crossborder cooperation initiatives, and thus to strengthen the relevance, impact, and sustainability of EU-funded programs like Interreg, it is fundamental to carefully examine these less visible, and frequently ignored, aspects of national borders that continue to exist in what is being celebrated a "borderless" Europe.

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