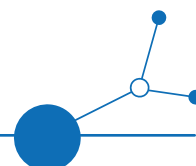


Charter

for participatory cross-border
cooperation governance in Central Europe



Final Version

10 2026



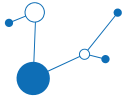


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Introduction

Definition of Central Europe

Central Europe is not a strictly defined geographical-geopolitical reality. From the Mitteleuropa concept to the Central Europe Interreg programme, several attempts have been made over the past century to define a specific region. Each experiment is questionable and necessarily contains inconsistent elements.

In this document, in line with the project consortium's understanding, the term 'Central Europe' is used in a broad sense, referring to the former CADSES (Central, Adriatic, Danubian and South-East European) area. The main reason for this is that a comprehensive territorial development vision for the European Union, the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), was last published in 1999, which resulted in the Vision Planet strategy document for the zone comprising several candidate countries. Vision Planet not only wanted to provide a spatial planning vision in preparation for the enlargement of the European Union to the East, but also to create a network of experts with the participation of planners from the 13 countries concerned. Between 2000 and 2006, the realisation of these goals was supported by the CADSES IIIB Interreg programme through nearly 150 projects.

Map 1 - The CADSES Region



Source: Claudia Valle ed. (2005): INTERREG III B CADSES. Neighbourhood Programme - Project Book. CADSES Joint Technical Secretariat. Dresden. URL: https://www.oerok.qv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Bilder/4.Reiter-Contact_Point/IIIB/cadses/unterlagen/cadses_projects_in_progress_2edition.pdf



20 years after the end date of the CADSES programme and before another major EU Eastern enlargement, building on the experience of the BorderLabs CE project implemented under the Interreg Central Europe Programme, we see the need to develop a new strategic vision for Central Europe as part and in support of the development of a new comprehensive EU perspective. This includes also the creation of a network of experts and planners, as intended by the initiators of Vision Planet in 1998-1999.

By identifying the territorial demarcation of the "Central European" vision with the former CADSES area, we can not only take stock of the integration processes of the last 20 years, but also apply a territorial demarcation suited to the expected accession of the Western Balkan countries, as well as Ukraine and Moldova. This is the area most directly affected by the expected new wave of enlargement.

Reflections on recent and future challenges and their effects on Central Europe

Although renationalising tendencies on the European continent have increased spectacularly over the past decade, revisiting the borders previously doomed to disappear, and the neoliberal agenda of the 1990s, which focused on flows rather than spaces, has also been neglected, still, the repeated crises in the European Union have confirmed the need for common, cross-border action.

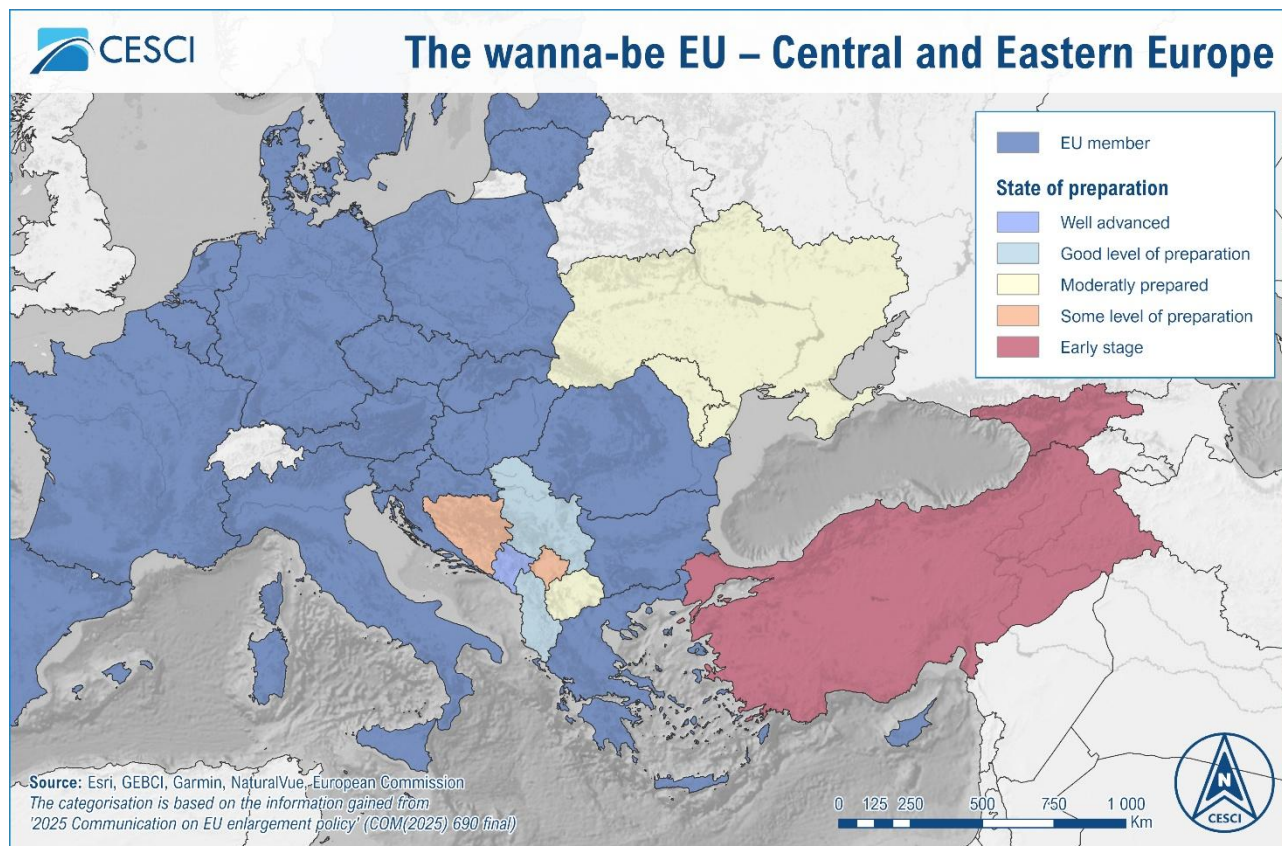
It is clear that global migration flows, climate change, the Russian threat to security policies, the global pandemic and future epidemics, energy policy challenges cannot be addressed at the level of the nation state, and require cooperation between Member States, since none of the above factors stop at national borders. Coordination is also necessary due to the fact that the social, economic and environmental impacts of these challenges have not equally affected European countries and macro-regions, and that the responses of individual governments differ significantly, making it difficult to speak with one voice.

Over the next decade, at least seven new Member States are expected to join the European Union, making not only institutional reforms unavoidable, but Member States also need to rethink the territorial aspects of cooperation. The accession of the Western Balkan countries, as well as Ukraine and Moldova, will create radically new territorial dynamics, flows, geopolitical and security policy relations, to which the EU will also have to respond. The Western Balkan countries have been waiting for accession for almost 25 years, which has radically reduced their commitment to the EU and helped the EU's external competitors gain ground in the region. This could be further eroded by an eased Ukrainian accession, parallel with re-emerging ethnic tensions in the region. Ukraine is expected to become the second-largest country in the EU after its accession, with huge stocks of rare metals and critical raw materials, as well as more extensive agricultural production than all current Member States.

At the same time, the economic performance and level of development of the candidate countries is far below the EU average: the difference is much greater than before the 2004 enlargement. The Eastern regions of Ukraine are in ruins. The accession process itself will require extraordinary financial efforts from EU Member States that are currently stagnating or producing minimal growth, which is expected to trigger internal tensions both at EU and Member State levels. The challenge cannot be tackled by purely fiscal means, which will narrow rather than expand over the next decade: there will also be serious territorial aspects. Although, with the exception of Ukraine the candidates are mostly small-sized states, the accession process will result in an overall increase of 20% in the territory of the Union, while there are very large disparities in terms of transport, energy and economic infrastructure. Serious territorial explorations and analyses are needed in order to deal with these complex phenomena during enlargement and to achieve integration into the EU as a whole with as little disruption as possible.



Map 2 - The territory of the expected enlarged EU with the status of the candidate countries





Less borders more connections

The role of borders in integration in light of the former Iron Curtain

As a result of the EU enlargements of 2004, 2007 and 2013, the Central European region has undergone spectacular changes. Borders have gradually become airborne: not only did the former Iron Curtain fall, but lively movements began on the border sections of the former communist countries, which were also closely guarded against each other. There has been a spectacular increase in the flow of goods towards each other, tens of thousands of cross-border commuters have appeared, shopping tourism has started to flourish, and thousands of citizens of the former Eastern bloc live in a neighbouring country. Thanks to the gradual expansion of the Schengen area, cross-border public services and functional zones have emerged in the same way as in the core areas of the European Union. At the same time, migration has reached dramatic proportions: there are countries in the region that have lost 20-50% of their population as a result of emigration since 1990. This phenomenon has generated a series of social, economic and territorial challenges throughout the region, to which no comprehensive response has yet been found.

The reasons and motivations for the changes were both geopolitical (the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON, European integration), infrastructural (the expansion of the TEN-T and TEN-E networks), economic (integration into the Single Market), social (free movement within the EU and its consequences), legal (adoption of the EU acquis) and governance-institutional (integration into the EU institutional system, spread of cross-border governance solutions, cooperation, development of networks, etc.).

In the past, borders have been a source of permanent conflicts in the CADSES region. As EU integration progressed, the blurred contour zones of the border areas gradually appeared at the place of the line-like borders. Interoperability has also dramatically reduced the importance of geographical-political boundaries, valuing the importance of cooperation. Rational and functional considerations have become increasingly popular instead of nationalist, ethnic, cultural and religious distinctions, sometimes resulting in narratives with identity-forming power. In all this, ethnic minorities, previously treated as causes of conflict, are able to play a positive bridge role, which is a completely new situation in the region.

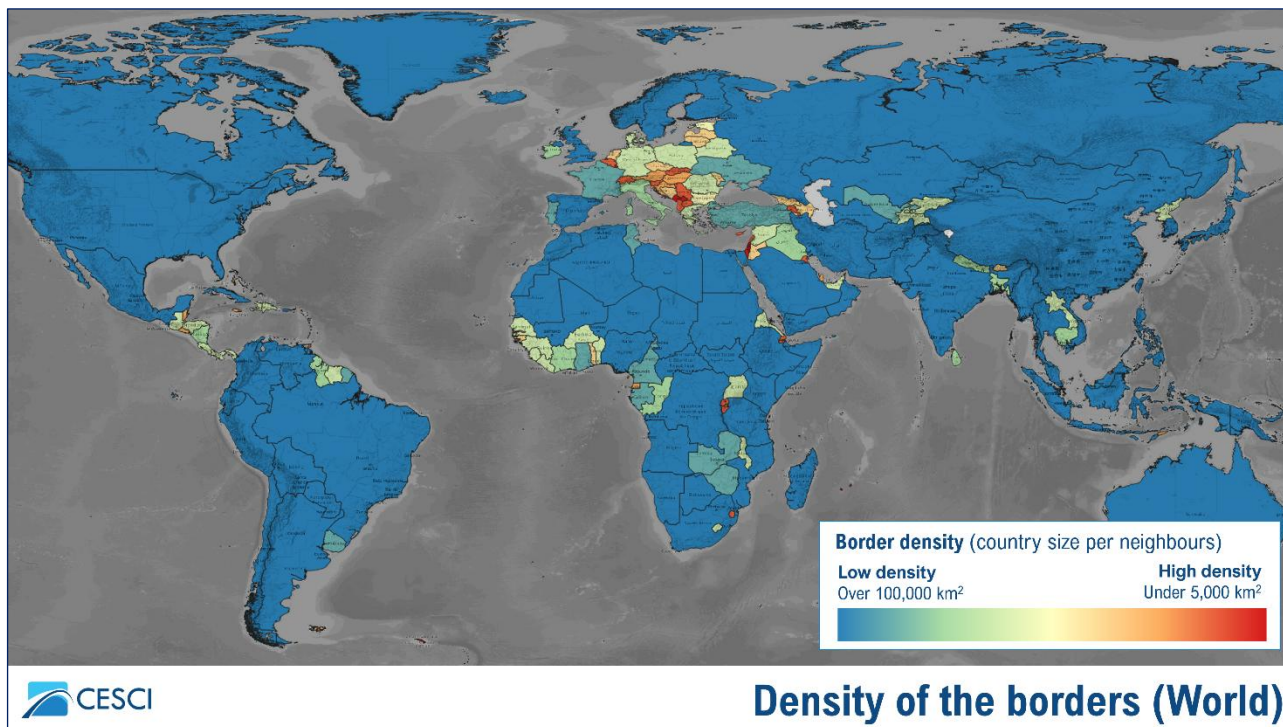
Current status of borders in Central Europe

The region is also a global leader in terms of specific border density: it has the largest length of borders per unit area in the world. As a result, a very large proportion of the population lives in border areas. While at EU level this ratio is around 1/3, the entire territory of many countries in the CADSES area falls into this category. Typically, the average size of the countries within the Danube region (except Ukraine and Germany) barely exceeds 75,000 km², which is only half of the EU indicator anyway.

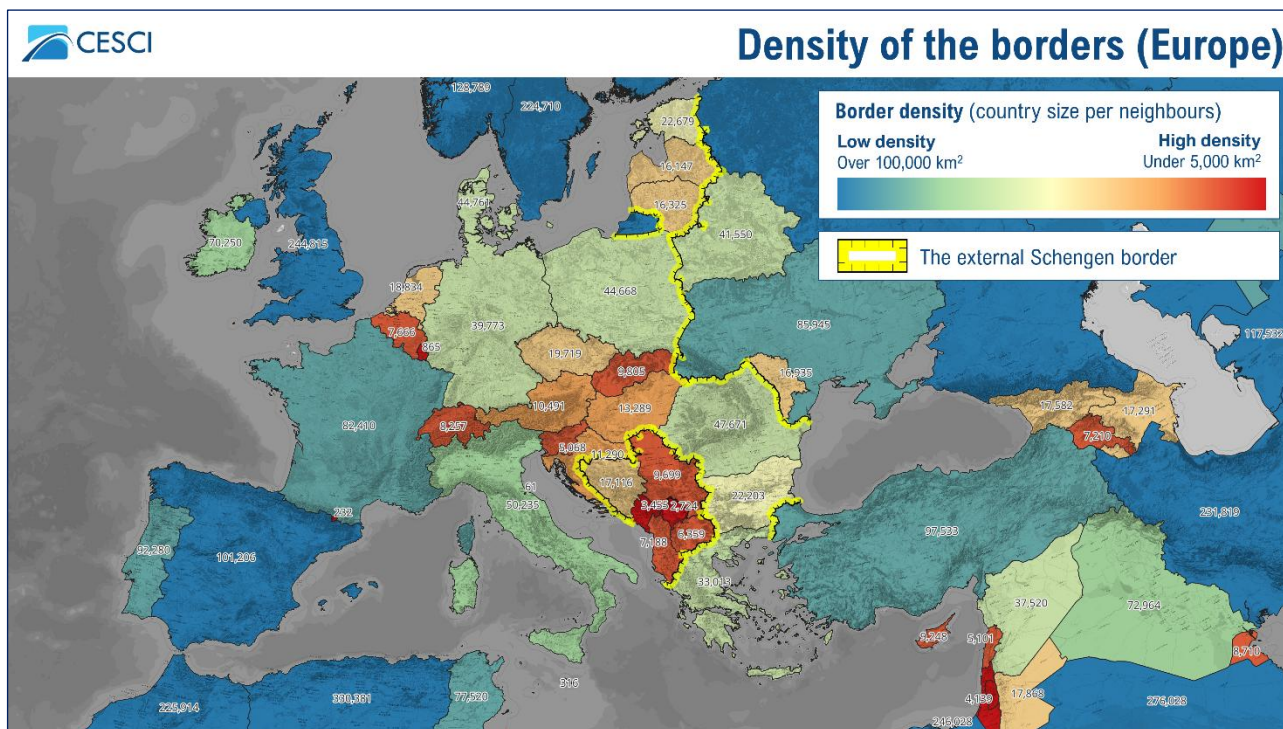
Dense administrative borders are a major obstacle to integration, as different legal systems and different territorial distribution of competences reinforce the dividing effects of borders. Besides, past frictions survive in mental maps of the people, through the long-lasting effects of so-called phantom borders. In addition, today the external Schengen border stretches through the region, which is represented by ever-expanding border fences. We are witnessing the emergence of new barriers along the EU's Eastern and South-eastern borders, which is having a negative impact on the region's further integration, both physically and mentally. While functional links have resulted in intensively cooperating urban areas, twinning and cross-border regional governance structures in many places, segregation and exclusion phenomena are also common.



Map 3 - Frequency of borders on the Earth



Map 4 - Frequency of borders in Europe





Towards a new territorial vision for Central Europe - through strategic planning

Antecedents and new challenges

Between 1994 and 1999, the European Union's first integrated territorial vision, the ESDP, was created. The document summarised the various national development needs in an exemplary way, preparing the EU for the accession of the new Member States and also introducing European spatial planning. Although a single European territorial policy has not been established since then and Member States have not applied the ESDP territorial vision with the same enthusiasm and the same commitment, the document has still had a number of pan-European impacts: the development and consolidation of transnational Interreg programmes, the launch of the ESPON programme, the integration of territorial aspect into cohesion policy, the spread of polycentric urban development practices, the introduction of territorial impact analysis in the policy-making process, etc. can all be seen as a result of the ESDP.

The vision for the Central European region, Vision Planet, was also inspired by the document and led to the launch of the CADSES programme, which then split into the Danube and Central Europe programmes and partly merged into the Adriatic-Ionian programme. In the meantime, in addition to funding frameworks, new development policy initiatives have emerged. Currently, the Central European region is divided into four macro-regions, which have different intervention logics and development priorities, and their interventions are mostly not coordinated. In the meantime, a new macro-regional cooperation covering the Carpathians is also being developed. These will further reinforce the fragmentation of the region, although the Member States located in the former CADSES region will play a crucial integrating role in the planned enlargement process. Their geographical location, their security and geopolitical role, the location of the existing infrastructure elements, their direct economic and social relations with the acceding countries, the existence of cross-border forms of governance and their experience in the previous enlargement process precede this.

Seamless integration presupposes the creation of a comprehensive territorial vision at European level, to which macro-regional, bi- or multilateral, national, regional and cross-border planning processes can adhere. To achieve this aim, the vision-building processes at each territorial level will have to be coordinated.

The role of cross-border planning in Central European integration

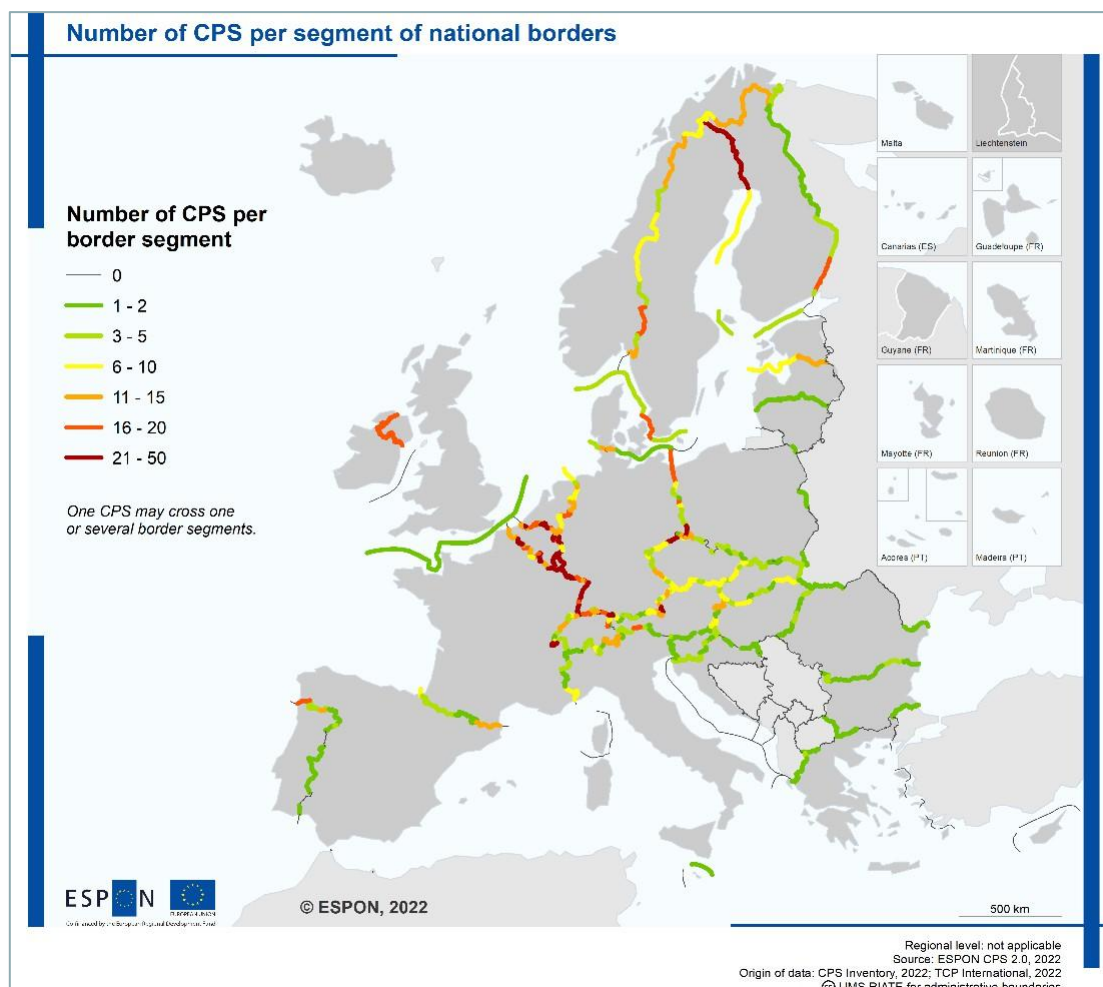
Despite European planning efforts, it is still rare that the territorial development plans of a given country take into account the realities created by the intentions and policies of neighbouring countries. It is rather the practice that transboundary areas form a white spot, which sometimes severely affects the population of border regions. Often the territorial pattern of functions follows the domestic administrative system and urban network characteristics, creating a kind of gravity from the periphery to the centres. Public services are increasingly costly to maintain in depopulated border regions, and inefficiencies are driving decision-makers to reduce them. This leads to further outmigration, and create territorial discontinuities along administrative boundaries.

In many cases, however, urban centres on the other side of the border could reduce the negative effects of depopulation, provided that their service functions are taken into account in national documents. This can not only increase the population-retaining power of disadvantaged areas, but also guarantee the economies of scale needed to operate the functions available across the border, creating a win-win situation for the budgets of both countries.



At macro-regional level, such service integration works against discontinuities, strengthens the volume of cross-border factor flows and territorial integration, while also increasing cohesion at regional level. In many parts of Central Europe, sharing services is still an exception, as the Cross-Border Public Services 2.0 project implemented within the framework of the ESPON programme pointed out spectacularly on the map.

Map 5 - Frequency of cross-border public services in Europe



Source: ESPON CPS 2.0

At the same time, during the last decade more and more intensive relocation processes could be observed in some urban functional districts (e.g. Szczecin, Görlitz, Vienna, Bratislava, Košice, Oradea, etc.). In these cases, cross-border residential mobility generates development needs that are not taken into account in planning documents at national level for the same reason as in the case of the management of their own peripheries: suburbanisation processes around a cross-border centre cannot be predicted by a plan which does not indicate the centre due to the above-mentioned national competences for territorial development, as it is located beyond the border. At the Central European level, such cross-border functional areas (defined not only by cities but also by river valleys, nature reserves, industrial zones, educational institutions, etc.) can also be drivers of wider integration, coordination of territorial processes and balanced development of the whole region.



At the same time, the desired cross-border integrated planning is hampered by a number of factors. National statistical offices do not collect data on flows that determine cross-border integration: the number of commuters for work and educational purposes, users of public services, regular cross-border shoppers, movers, etc. is unknown. As a result of the abolition of internal border controls, there is no longer traffic counting at the border crossings.

The different planning traditions have also developed organically on a national basis, and the different zoning classifications, the related legal background and the different territorial administrative competence systems make it extremely difficult to coordinate the relevant settlement and development documents. And even if initiatives are taken by local actors to address these shortcomings, their funding is difficult to solve, limited to the duration of a project. Additionally, the relevant competences are usually not where the intention is.

A particular type of cross-border area is represented by the junctions of three national borders (so-called tripoints), where multiple administrative, legal, spatial, transport and logistical barriers converge. Tripoints provide valuable laboratories for cross-border cooperation and serve as testing grounds for innovative models of multi-level governance. A notable example is the Polish-Czech-German border region, which constitutes the biggest Pilot Action of the BorderLabs CE project.

However, good examples still exist today. CentropaMAP is the only initiative within the CADSES region that regularly collects and publishes data and maps on the phenomena of cross-border integration of the metropolitan region around Vienna (AT). The twin towns of Komárno (SK) and Komárom (HU) as well as Giurgiu (RO) and Ruse (BG) prepared their joint urban management plan in 2012. Within the Italy-Austria Interreg CBC Programme, four cross-border CLLDs (Community-led Local Development) are implemented, preceded by a participatory planning process.

Well-established examples from Western Europe demonstrate the long-term benefits of multilateral territorial governance. The Upper Rhine Region around Basel (France-Germany-Switzerland) and the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion (Belgium-Germany-Netherlands) show how cross-border functional areas can evolve into stable frameworks for spatial planning and territorial development, strategic planning, mobility management, innovation policies, and public service provision. In particular, these experiences demonstrate that the coordination of spatial policies across national borders contributes to more sustainable land use, more efficient infrastructure development, and the reduction of land-use conflicts.

At the same time, these examples and initiatives are isolated and not widely known. Cohesion in Central Europe and the integration of the new accession countries would be greatly facilitated if these examples would be treated as models in other regions, making cross-border planning a common practice within the CADSES region.

This will require the following interventions:

- promote cooperation between national statistical offices to provide relevant data for planning;
- promote the establishment and the operation of cross-border observatories generating data on cross-border flows;
- establish the network of planners in Central Europe;
- support regular professional exchanges between the planners;
- involve national authorities in future planning in Central Europe to ensure the harmonisation of territorial developments across the state borders;
- use the evidence provided by ESPON;
- apply cross-border impact assessment in domestic legislation.



Lessons learnt from the BorderLabs CE project:

Cross-border planning has a dual aim: (1) to recover the disadvantaged situation of (border) areas left behind, and the discontent of people living there; (2) to diminish the barrier effects of the administrative borders. To achieve these goals, the first step for stakeholders is to identify the joint challenges and complementary advantages on which the joint vision can be built. The vision sets the stage for strategic documents that go beyond national frameworks and strengthen cross-border cohesion.

Cross-border planning cannot be separated from cross-border governance. First, the realisation of the plans and the sustainability of joint developments require a permanent form of governance. Second, the shared vision has to be given legitimacy through participatory planning methods, involving the civil society. Finally, the implementation of cross-border soft plans is impossible without matching them into hard planning documents, and the active involvement of the national, regional and local authorities. At the same time, the joint vision has to reach beyond the national confines.

For successful cross-border planning, there is a need for:

- taking the cultural diversity in how to think and do spatial planning into account;
- a shared spatial vision on the future of the cross-border area, which is unimaginable without mutual trust;
- common understanding of the planning objectives;
- reflection on harmonised standards regarding the planning objectives, process and methods applied;
- realistic goals to avoid frustration;
- soft and incremental planning methods enabling enough flexibility during the design and contributing to trust building;
- capacity building on planning, intercultural dialogue, fundraising and the adaptation of participatory planning methods;
- creation of an exchange platform for dialogue;
- legitimacy, which presupposes that the plans are also intelligible for ordinary citizens who must take part in the design process (stakeholder mapping, active participation);
- a spatial monitoring system collecting evidence on cross-border flows and the results of cross-border investments;
- permanency going beyond the project logic through the development of institutional continuity (governance of integrated planning and development);
- political commitment on behalf of the decision-makers at different levels, which can guarantee the financial background, even across state borders.

The partners of the BorderLabs CE project have experience in the field of cross-border planning, whose lessons can be upscaled through a larger network of experts:

- EGTC GO is the only entity in the EU which has already implemented three cross-border Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) in the fields of tourism infrastructure, health care and cultural infrastructure; the last one involved funding from two different countries, and different types of funds.
- The partners of the Three-Country Area - the Saxon Ministry of Regional Development, the Institute for Territorial Development of the Lower Silesian Voivodeship (IRT), the Euroregion Nysa, and the EGTC NOVUM - developed the document *"Citizen-oriented Vision of Development and Successful Transformation for the Three-Country Area"*, which sets out a shared, citizen-oriented vision for the development and transformation of the Polish-Czech-German border region, as well as a common strategic framework for the transformation of the Three-Country Area. Its objective is to define development directions for the Three-Country Area and to



propose solutions aimed at the integration of the border area, strengthening trilateral governance structures, which may also be applicable to other cross-border regions in Europe.

- To analytically base the Vision, the partners undertook activities aimed at building so-called “mental bridges”, supporting better mutual understanding and fostering a perception of the Three-Country Area as a coherent area of cooperation. A synthesis of German, Polish, and Czech strategic and planning documents was also prepared in the form of a multilingual “triple map”, complemented by a “Glossary of planning ideas and development concepts”, enabling a better understanding of different planning traditions and development approaches on all three sides of the border.
- The Ister-Granum EGTC is implementing the second territorial action plan along the Slovak-Hungarian border (the first one addressed employment, the current one is designed to develop a cross-border tourist destination).
- Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice have a long record of cross-border participatory planning and vision making for the double city; the current joint vision and action plan with a time horizon of 2030, which have been developed through citizens’ future conferences, include interventions in the fields of education, quality of life, business and economy, communication and participation.
- CESCO has developed a methodology, called cohesion-based cross-border planning, which has been applied in the design of seven cross-border integrated spatial strategies and several cross-border Interreg programmes.



Reconciliation in Central Europe through cross-border participatory governance

Troubled past

Over the past century, the CADSES region has been particularly exposed to border disputes. In 1910, four major empires shared much of the territory: Russia, Germany, the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The peace treaties that ended the two Balkan wars and the First World War radically transformed the continent's map, but it could not guarantee lasting borders. During and after the Second World War, and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, newer and newer states were created, and hidden conflicts caused by territorial disputes still characterise the area divided through the borders of almost 20 countries.

In particular in the Western Balkans and due to the Russian aggression also in Ukraine and Moldova, addressing the situation of national, religious and cultural minorities in the territories of the countries concerned is a major challenge. Since very often these minorities belong to the constituent nation of a neighbouring country, the level of trust between individual neighbouring peoples has traditionally been low. Borders are often seen as scars of history, which have a strong alienating effect, reinforcing territorial fragmentation.

The situation is made even more difficult by the fact that the fate of these peoples has been determined by great empires for more than two hundred years: when they became independent after the Second World War, they rarely followed the way of Western democracies. Dictatorships replaced dictatorships, and most of the peoples lived the second half of the 20th century under Soviet occupation and the totalitarian control of Communist Parties. Thus, democratic institutions such as those in the Western part of the continent have not been able to develop in these countries for hundreds of years: participatory democracy mechanisms are at an embryonic stage and often even absent, especially in the case of cross-border governance.

Cross-border participatory governance as a tool of reconciliation

After the fall of the communist regime, cross-border cooperation appeared and increased also in Central Europe, for which the European Union, Interreg and the pre-accession and neighbourhood programmes have been providing dedicated funding since 1989/1990. These programmes are not only a tool for cross-border relations and confidence building, but are also suitable for conveying the values of the European Union, promoting EU membership and facilitating the adoption of EU policies: they are a real tool for EU integration. This is true for the enlargement process that started in 2004 and for what is now planned.

In addition to financial incentives, the liberation from communist oppression and the common desire for Euro-Atlantic integration have strengthened solidarity and confidence-building among peoples. EU alignment and policy adoption included democratisation of public administrations, strengthening of the principles of tolerance and partnership, and the spread of concrete forms of cooperation. In the latter, the Council of Europe also played an important role, providing the regulatory framework for cross-border cooperation at sub-national level with the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Madrid Outline Convention.

In addition to the twinning relations, the first Euroregion in the region was established already in 1991, on the German-Czech-Polish triple border, under the name of Neisse-Nysa-Nisa. Its territory largely overlaps with the **Three-Country Area (Trójzienie)**, which constitutes one of the Pilot Action areas of the **BorderLabs CE** project and a space around which numerous initiatives aimed at cross-border integration have been developed on a regional level. By the early 2000s, such organisations had mushroomed throughout



the former communist bloc (even Russian-Ukrainian Euroregions were founded). Czechia is particularly at the forefront of Euroregional cooperation: the 13 Euroregions cover all Czech border regions, represent their interests towards the respective Czech government through a common association, and play an important role in removing legal obstacles, launching cross-border public services and developing inter-institutional relations.

In several countries, Euroregional activities declined in the second half of the 2000s, giving way to the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), the cross-border governance solution established by the European Union in 2006. In many cases, the founders of former Euroregions have decided to set up an independent legal entity in the Member States concerned, but EGTCs have also been set up in many places where such an organisational history cannot be found. Most groupings in the Central European region were created with Hungarian participation (27 in total), partly due to the policy and financial support of the respective governments. However, it can be observed that a higher level of institutionalisation does not necessarily imply an expansion of democratic participation. Most of the groupings coordinate investments and projects in the given border region as management bodies without involving the citizens. Thus, although they contribute to mitigating the dividing effects of borders, they do not have a significant impact on the identity of the population, on its mental maps or on the perception of the neighbouring people.

An exceptional good example is the Czech-Polish EuroSchola Institute in Třinec, Czech Republic, which organised intercultural and language trainings and actions in the Czech-Slovak-Polish tri-border region, involving local citizens, in the first one and a half decades of the 2000s. Between Esztergom (HU) and Štúrovo (SK) the Mária Valéria Bridge was rebuilt in 2001. Since then, on the initiative of the civil society, an artist symbolically protects the facility from further destruction in the framework of six-monthly scholarships, with the help of actions and performances involving the citizens. At the initiative of one of them, the annual 'Breakfast on the Bridge' event is organised by randomly bringing together citizens from both cities to spend their breakfast together. Based on domestic experiences, the EGTC Euregio Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino organised the first Citizens' Councils in 2022. They consulted with everyday citizens on the visibility and tangible outcomes of the EGTC's operation.

These existing good examples are also exceptions. The practice of participatory cross-border governance is still in its infancy in the region, although bridges between citizens can ensure lasting cross-border links. The measures taken during the COVID outbreak have sometimes hermetically sealed off organisations that had previously worked closely together. Reports and studies of the pandemic period clearly demonstrated that the most effective action could be enforced by local actors whose phones had numbers of citizens with similar potential across the border.

After the storms of the past century, the Central European region needs reconciliation, confidence building, cooperation and the protection of democratic values. This is particularly relevant in border areas where historical divisions can be transformed into opportunities for cooperation through participatory governance, joint vision-building and long-term territorial partnerships. This can ensure the internal social cohesion of the region and the basic conditions for peaceful development. If the conditions for cross-border planning are created, democratic participatory planning is essential in order to create a sense of ownership and thus a cross-border identity in the population of border regions.

To this end, it is proposed to support the following interventions:

- promote the development of cross-border governance solutions;
- unite the existing structures (euroregions, EGTCs, twin cities, etc.) at Central European level;
- promote and popularise participatory methods, solutions and best practices;
- promote the networking of citizens taking part in cross-border initiatives across the region, and involve them in future planning.



Lessons learnt from the BorderLabs CE project:

Establishing permanent and participatory governance structures is key because it ensures long-term cooperation beyond ad-hoc projects and electoral periods and helps build real functional ties. The more advanced the institutional framework, the stronger the cross-border cohesion, e.g. facilitating the development of cross-border services.

The diversity of legal frameworks and administrative structures, and consequently the different distribution of competences, can make the preparation and implementation of joint strategies or development plans challenging. As the results of Pilot Action 1 (PA1) have demonstrated, one possible solution—particularly in complex governance settings such as a trilateral area—is to start with an informal vision document that outlines a shared picture of the future and defines a common cross-border and transnational objective towards which all partners strive together. The adaptation of this vision to existing legal frameworks, as well as its implementation and governance, can then be entrusted to the respective regions and countries. This approach respects their individual administrative and legal systems while providing a common strategic direction for cross-border cooperation and development.

Cross-border participatory governance coincides with the principles of good governance, as active citizen participation is a prerequisite for the vitality of democracy through enhancing the legitimacy of decisions and trust in the democratic institutions. When involving institutional actors, NGOs, civil society organisations (targeted participation) and ordinary citizens (wide participation), not only the frequency of interpersonal connections, the level of trust and enlarged ownership will be guaranteed, but also the democratic commitment of the people and the institutions will be fuelled.

Successful cross-border participatory governance requires:

- knowledge of the different participation cultures in the different countries;
- disseminating knowledge and good practices of cross-border governance;
- capacity building for spreading practices of participation, intercultural dialogue, and providing guidance (coaching) for participatory solutions;
- thematisation of concrete, adequate place-based subjects that matter for and motivate the citizens to participate;
- ensuring permanency for citizens' engagement, e.g. through working committees, workshops, citizens' forums or councils, online surveys, etc.;
- ensuring representativity;
- combination of colourful formats for participation;
- providing a solid framework through adapted rules for participation;
- inclusion of the citizens' proposals in the development actions of the cross-border region or giving well-explained feedback to the citizens when a proposal cannot be implemented;
- creation of platforms for exchanges horizontally, vertically and transversally and facilitating trust building between regional and national, regional and local authorities;
- support for activities creating cross-border added value and long-term sustainability.

The partners of the BorderLabs CE project operate diverse models of cross-border participatory governance:

- The Euroregion Nisa was the first structure of this type established in the post-communist bloc, founded in 1991. It became a management body of small project funds reaching 160,000 citizens between 2014 and 2020, and it is an engine of the Czech Euroregional movement, coordinated today through a partner association of the Czech government.
- EGTCs GO, Ister-Granum and NOVUM apply the most advanced institutionalised cross-border cooperation form, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation. The Ister-Granum EGTC has been developing a comprehensive cross-border network of local producers and local markets, based on the needs of



citizens. EGTC GO coordinated the implementation of the cross-border European Capital of Culture program of Gorizia and Nova Gorica with broad participation of local associations, institutions and citizens.

- The European Double City of Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice has a long history of cooperation: the representatives of both towns signed the cooperation agreement more than 50 years ago. Since then on many levels many joint bodies and initiatives have been developed, like the European University Viadrina and the Collegium Polonicum, the cross-border bus line, the cooperation office, etc. Since 2009, the cities have drafted several future visions and action plans with the active involvement of local citizens, and the establishment of a Citizens' Council is foreseen for autumn 2026.
- Upper Austria provides the Joint Secretariats for the Interreg A programmes between Austria and Bavaria, and Austria and Czechia and it involves citizens and cross-border workers in the identification of cross-border legal obstacles.



Enhanced integration through the elimination of cross-border legal and administrative obstacles

The challenge of cross-border legal obstacles

The persistence of legal and administrative obstacles not only makes the everyday life of people living in border regions and integration more difficult in Central Europe, but also throughout the EU. It is no coincidence that the European Commission has launched a comprehensive series of initiatives since 2015, starting with the Cross-Border Review project and continuing with the Communication ‘Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions’ and the systematic implementation of its actions. From 2025 onwards, the BRIDGEforEU Regulation offers an institutional solution to systematically remove such barriers. The b-solutions initiative coordinated by the AEBC, as well as interventions under the ISO1 Interreg Specific Objective applied by several Interreg programmes, also help to remove barriers, which typically occur in sectors where Member States have retained their sovereignty and there has been no comprehensive alignment with EU law (e.g. health, social care, education, public transport, etc.).

All this means that a person in a situation of health emergency or injured in an accident near the border cannot be assisted by the specialists of the ambulance station located directly across the border; the arrival of the home ambulance must be awaited, which may cost people lives. Cross-border bus and coach services cannot be used for domestic journeys, but only for international journeys, which significantly increases the losses of the service. A pensioner who has moved across the border is not entitled to care services for the elderly in his new home country, as (s)he paid contributions in her/his former country of residence, etc. Such mundane annoyances are particularly disturbing within cross-border functional urban areas, where tens of thousands of people face similar challenges on a daily basis. These obstacles may deter many people from using services in a nearby urban centre across the border to work or study there. This in turn weakens the overall level of trust, the development of an overall better territorial economy (competitiveness) and cross-border integration.

In addition to ad-hoc barrier management, usually related to a project or investment, good practices are also known within Central Europe. In the Euroregions Spree-Neiße-Bober and Pomerania, information points are operated and being established to provide citizens with personalised advice in the legal frameworks of cross-border employment, public services, social assistance, etc. The region is also at the forefront of the application of the BRIDGEforEU Regulation: the first Cross-Border Coordination Point (CBCP) was established in Hungary based on the experiences of the Hungarian-Slovak strategic #ACCESS project promoting legal accessibility. Three of the six ‘relevant authorities’ designated in accordance with the Regulation are also located within Central Europe: Czechia, Poland and Romania. In addition, two groups from Italy (EGTC GO and Senza Confini EGTC) and the Province of Upper Austria successfully submitted applications to the Commission’s call for the establishment and launch of CBCPs at the end of 2025.

The removal of barriers also has an impact on the other two areas mentioned above. It is in vain that joint plans are drawn up, and it is in vain that citizens can participate in the elaboration of these plans if they are subsequently not able to implement them due to legal obstacles. It is therefore proposed to carry out the following interventions:

- support the establishment and networking of cross-border coordination points under the BRIDGEforEU Regulation;
- promote institutional cooperation for permitted obstacles;
- popularise best practices of obstacle management (online, offline publications, study visits, webinars).



Lessons learnt from the BorderLabs CE project:

The frequency of border obstacles increases in parallel with the intensification of cooperation. If the borders are closed, there is no mobility, which could generate legal and administrative obstacles. On the contrary, in a well-integrated cross-border functional area, obstacles proliferate and are regenerated at another scale or in another way.

Within the EU, obstacles bothering border people the most especially characterise sectors where the Member States keep their sovereignty, and the EU has no competences. The most frequent obstacles are linked to taxation and social security, which fall under national jurisdiction.

At the same time, not every barrier is an obstacle, or even if it is, it is not necessarily of a legal nature. Consequently, the management of obstacles requires a systematic and problem-oriented approach. Furthermore, not every obstacle can be resolved through legal amendments; there is a need for innovative, particular, tailor-made approaches and sets of solutions.

As obstacles arise at different territorial levels, the methods of multi-level governance are inevitable to adapt. The best way to manage obstacles is to prevent their occurrence through dialogue, mutual knowledge and understanding, as well as ex-ante cross-border territorial impact assessment.

Successful management of legal and administrative obstacles at the borders necessitates:

- developing capacities and enhancing the sensitivity of the relevant authorities and institutions;
- involving the national-level decision-makers in consultations;
- permanent management of the obstacles;
- sharing information through information offices and personalised consultancy services;
- facilitating intercultural understanding to find a common ground among the national systems.

The partners of the BorderLabs CE project have accumulated useful lessons on obstacle management:

- The Association of Euroregions of the Czech Republic (AEČR) supports the removal of border obstacles through calls for reports from the ground, and consultations with the national authorities.
- EGTC GO gathered experiences on obstacle management when implementing cross-border projects, and provides expertise to resolve similar ones; e.g. to manage cross-border public procurement, the grouping has developed an online platform harmonised with the Italian and Slovenian rules.
- The Ister-Granum EGTC published an online guide presenting the legislative background for retail of local products in Slovakia and Hungary to facilitate cross-border local product sales.
- In 2021, the State Government of Upper Austria started systematic collection and elimination of cross-border obstacles with Bavaria and the Czech Republic.
- Within the framework of the operation of strategic importance (OSI) called #ACCESS of the Hungary-Slovakia Interreg Programme, CESC and CESC Carpathia are working on the removal of several obstacles between 2023 and 2029.



Conclusion

The broader Central European region will face major challenges in the next decade. Some of the challenges addressing Europe as a whole (migration from the Middle East, security policy, new enlargement) will be much deeper than in other parts of Europe, but the success of the responses to these challenges will also determine the fate of the whole European project. It therefore does not matter how and with what level of preparedness the countries of the CADSES region will address these issues. Coordinated action, a common vision and comprehensive management of territorial processes will be needed.

The current document calls on governments, decision-makers and planning professionals in the region to start working together on the necessary solutions.

The initiators of the Charter specifically call on regional planning professionals to work together within a platform that will allow them to reflect in depth on the issues outlined in the Charter and to lay the foundations for the resulting interventions.

Partners of the BorderLabs CE project

Saxon State Ministry
for Regional Development

Central European Service
for Cross-Border Initiatives

Dolnoslaskie Region -
Institute for Territorial Development

Euroregion Nisa

City of Frankfurt (Oder)

European Grouping of Territorial
Cooperation - EGTC GO

Ister-Granum European Grouping for
Territorial Cooperation Ltd.

European Grouping of Territorial
Cooperation NOVUM

State Government of Upper Austria