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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Chirodea, F. (2021). The Issue of Border Regions in the Context of Deepening the European Integration Process. In F. Chirodea, C. V. Toca, L. Soproni, A. Stoica, & K. Czimre (Eds.), *Europe in a changing world: opportunities and challenges*. Oradea: Oradea University Press. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-76830-1>

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# The Issue of Border Regions in the Context of Deepening the European Integration Process

*Florentina CHIRODEA\**

**Abstract:** *Borders can have a positive impact upon the economic activity of a region. The reduction of the barrier effect, as achieved in the European Union, has led to a diminution in non-homogeneities in the areas situated on different sides, as well to a decrease in discontinuity as regards the flows of goods, services and information. Among the other aspects that had a crucial impact upon the regions of Europe, one might include the achievement of the single market in 1992, the elimination of customs formalities and duties, and the harmonization and mutual recognition of technical rules in each Member State. A decisive influence in the transformation of border regions into areas of economic growth was the INTERREG program, which financed interpersonal exchange projects, infrastructure investments and institutional cooperation initiatives. Regions close to the EU's internal borders also benefit from medium- and long-term cross-border cooperation and integration mechanisms, which trigger dynamic development processes in these areas. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of the factors involved in the transformation of a border region into a space for active contact and communication between different interconnected economies. In this study, we aim to identify the role of border and cross-border cooperation in the dynamics of border regions and to highlight the main typologies and theoretical models developed for border regions.*

**Key words:** frontiers, border region, European integration process, cross-border region

## Introduction

The industrial revolution of the second half of the nineteenth century established new ways of organization for both production and transport, based on technological innovation that promoted the large-scale production of goods. One hundred years later, another revolution manifested itself in industrial organization, starting from the need to interconnect the modes of production and transport, with radical consequences on logistics, information and communication processes. In the context of globalization, this has meant the relocation of goods management and of information activities, a process in which interconnection nodes play a strategic role. Thus, the differences between the industries producing goods and those providing services have been reduced; changes have emerged in the nature and forms of relationships between companies, while industrial networks have also been established. The economic organization of modern industries can evolve in three main forms - market, hierarchical structures and networks. Unlike the first two, a network structure ensures the complementarity of capabilities and actions, but also an effective combination of competition and cooperation supported by quality communications and regular interactions between independent partners (Nijkamp, 2000: 4-7).

In the early 2000s, Peter Nijkamp noted that this new paradigm has led to the emergence of various exploratory directions in the field of geography, economics and international trade, but also in regional development, where competitiveness is one of the key elements that acts towards the transformation of the region into a significant player in the global and open market economy. In a context in which industrial flows are present, competitiveness translates into actions performed not only better than those performed by others, but also together with others (Nijkamp, 2000: 6-8). The mobilization and unification of regional endogenous forces can be done through strategies and development programs aimed at improving competitive advantage (highly skilled labour force, low property prices, good governance and support for the private sector, a strong entrepreneurial spirit, accessibility, connectivity through integrated systems infrastructure etc.). In the particular case of border regions, these areas are usually defined by the state border and have been perceived for a long time as peripheral areas (Schack, 1999: 2).

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The concept of peripherality has been and continues to be a subject of study for economists, geographers, sociologists and the political scientists concerned with regional development. According to Kolosov and Morachevskaya, the periphery is often perceived as an area away from the urban agglomeration, located at the edge of the impact of the centres or in areas with poor economy, located along the borders. The two researchers highlight a number of features specific to peripheral regions: a high dependence on the decisions of central authorities; low population and settlement density; low level of development; an economy dominated by primary sectors; a low per capita income and low consumption (Kolosov, Morachevskaya, 2020: 4-5). On the other hand, the location of investments in a certain area leads to geographical polarization. Therefore, any region that has a strong economic structure, which is competitive in global markets and has a cheap and good infrastructure, can become a centre. The new model of organizing regional economies into a network structure favours the formation of centres in which new trends and images are created and disseminated, true gates through which countries come into contact with world markets. Therefore, the periphery can adapt to the new conditions of the world system and can evolve socio-economically, with or in relation to central areas (Erkut, Özgen, 2003: 5-6).

Borders can, in turn, have a positive impact upon the economic activity of a region. The reduction of the barrier effect, as achieved in the European Union, has led to a reduction of non-homogeneities and of areas placed on two sides; in addition, it resulted in a limitation of discontinuities in the flows of goods, services and information. The completion of the single market in 1992, the elimination of customs formalities and duties and the harmonization and mutual recognition of technical rules in each Member State were also crucial factors in the above-mentioned process of reducing the obstacle effect of borders. A decisive influence in the transformation of border regions into areas of economic growth was the INTERREG program, which financed interpersonal exchange projects, infrastructure investments and institutional cooperation initiatives. Regions close to the EU's internal borders also benefit from medium- and long-term cross-border cooperation and integration mechanisms, which trigger dynamic development processes in these areas. On the other hand, borders can also have negative influences, especially those located near the internal borders of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as those external to Eastern European Union (Niebuhr, 2005: 1). They are also caused by the geopolitical disorder in the area installed after the fall of the "Iron Curtain", which gave rise to territorial restructuring, followed by reordering processes as the EU border expanded towards the East (Wielgoths, Lechevalier, 2013: 10).

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the factors involved in transforming a border region into a space for active contact and communication between different interconnected economies. Starting from the well-known theories of regional development and based on the cohesion instruments and policies promoted by the European Union, we aim to identify the role of border and cross-border cooperation in the dynamics of border regions and to highlight the main typologies and theoretical models of border regions.

### **The role of borders in the development of border regions within the European Union**

In sociology, borders are seen as factors of inclusion / exclusion in relation to a social structure connected to a space. From the semantic perspective, borders include and exclude, separate and unify at the same time, regardless of whether the space is geographical or social; they are seen as representations of the dynamic limitations of actions, interactions and social relations (Schack, 1999: 4-5). In the last two decades there has been a change in the consideration of borders as geographical demarcations, the new perspective attributing to them the quality of social construct. The changing meaning given by the duality of borders changes the universal significance in the societal order and the image of borders as static structures has evolved towards the concept of bordering. This perspective focuses on borders as dynamic cultural processes, which can be analysed as social practices of social differentiation, as institutions established by political decisions and regulated by legal texts, as a subject of contestation and political change (Sendhardt, 2013: 25-26).

The impact of borders on economic activity in a region varies from positive values, to negative ones, despite globalization, accelerated European integration and the process of political and territorial restructuring on the continent (European Commission, 2017: 2). Although national borders within the EU lose their relevance to the day-to-day activities of border residents and decrease the importance of borders as an obstacle to the flow of goods, people and information diminishes, they are still correlated with fiscal, institutional, cultural and language differences. It is easy to see that due to the relatively low spatial interactions, the impact of the borders in the adjacent territories is negative. Also, the high degree of competitiveness given by the reduction of the barrier effect

will lead to the decline of some economic sectors in border areas, while others may find new export opportunities. For consumers, the phenomenon is the same - some products become cheaper due to competitiveness, others may become more expensive if companies located near the border consider that they obtain a higher profit by exporting them to other countries (Rietveld, 1999: 3).

In a study conducted by Cattán and Grasland, the researchers established the framework for analysing border effects, introducing two factors for the calculation of impact – the distance and the border, which correspond to two types of variables, a static one related to location in a certain space and the other one, related to flow and connected to spatial interaction. After processing the data, the two researchers concluded that closed and semi-permeable borders can generate non-homogeneities in areas situated in their vicinity, but also discontinuities in spatial flows and interactions. As the barrier effect is reduced and the border becomes more permeable, the model expects an increase in similarities in adjacent areas. Borders can become an obstacle, again and again when the intensity of spatial interaction suddenly decreases due to a weak or expensive transport and communication infrastructure, when consumer preference shift to national goods and services, when there are government interventions of various kinds or when we lack information on goods, services and capital in the neighbouring country. This effect is expressed in a variety of types of costs that include additional financial expenses and time-related costs (Cattán, Grasland, 1992).

In the case of fully open borders, the removal of political barriers meant the freedom of movement for both the population and the labour force, as well as a common currency (the euro). According to the model presented above, keeping the borders open for a long time would result in energetic interactions between actors on either side of the border. In reality, they are more limited, and border regions become rather transit areas. Other barriers become visible this time: the legislative and institutional framework or cultural and language differences. Small differences in production costs determine the attractiveness of goods in neighbouring areas. However, the price of fuel and housing makes the difference. Moreover, the history of communities on both sides of the border can create barriers in the minds of the population, even when they no longer exist physically (Anderson, O'Dowd, 1999: 600). However, the role of the open and of the semi-permeable border may be changed. Christopher Sohn highlights four factors that can be taken into account when we characterize the border as a source of opportunities in the context of an economy organized on a network structure: the positional benefit turns the border into an asset for the business environment adjacent to it; differentiated benefits obtained by exploiting economic, social and cultural differences, which in fact become a resource; benefits derived from the construction of a hybrid space in which flows are highly generated precisely by these differences; the specific identity of the regions on either side of the borders. The essential condition is that the actors involved in development should be able to understand, reinterpret the basic functions of national borders and exploit the opportunities offered, even in the context of a relative opening of borders (Basboga, 2020: 536).

### **The role of cross - border cooperation in the development of EU border region**

Another type of instrument for changing the role of the border, made available to the regions by the European Union since 1997, is territorial cohesion. Relatively new in the context of European regional policy, the term has often been used since 2000, and since 2013 it has become an integral part of the EU cohesion policy. Through the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, the European Commission promotes “an integrated approach to tackling problems at a geographically appropriate scale, which may require the cooperation of local, regional and even national authorities” in order to achieve a balanced and sustainable development of territories (Commission of the European Communities, 2008: 11). The document highlights the territorial diversity, the unique way of disposing localities<sup>1</sup> and the more concentrated and unevenly distributed economic activity, as related to the population across the EU, in order to find that the border regions are the most disadvantaged. The book proposes two strategies for overcoming obstacles. One takes into account the distance factor and proposes connecting territories not only through good intermodal transport connections and integrated transport systems, but also adequate access to healthcare, education, broadband internet, sustainable energy

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<sup>1</sup> In 2008, there were 5000 cities with a population ranging from 5000 to 50 000 inhabitants and almost 1000 cities with more than 50 000 inhabitants across the entire territory of the European Union. These territorial units are centres of economic, social and cultural activity, but the urban network has only several big cities (only 5 cities that are among the biggest 100 large cities in the world), (Commission of the European Communities, 2008: 6)

networks, strong connections between companies and research centres. The second strategy aims to overcome the divisive factor through strong cooperation at various levels (Commission of the European Communities, 2008: 6-7).

With 40% of the European territory classified as a border region and with the differences between the old and new Member States maintained, national borders are at risk of turning again into an obstacle to the cohesion process (Demetrova, Goodwin-Hawkins, Fischer, 2020: 2288). An even greater challenge is felt by the territories near the border, where different levels of well-being are found in relatively small neighbourhoods. In this case, the development and expansion of transport infrastructure and investments are recipes for reducing disparities, but usually the business environment in the more developed border region uses the territorial potential of the neighbouring region (easy access to primary resources and highly qualified, but poorly paid labour force) to maximize profit and increase competitiveness (Ruidisch, 2013: 103-107). Theoretical models assume the existence of economic relations in the field of services, production and consumption between the two neighbouring communities, which allow the meeting of domestic and external demand. Mutual relations can be created between the two border regions, which involve complementary exchanges of goods and complementary services between regions (Wróblewski, 2020: 4). In turn, entrepreneurs in the neighbouring area have increased opportunities to develop their business and access markets other than the local or the national ones. Another advantage relates to the partnerships that can be established between different actors located on both sides of the border, which can lead to increased spatial interactions and accelerate the integration process. Residents of these areas may find attractive the low cost of living on one side of the border or the high incomes that can be obtained in neighbouring regions (Erkut, Ózgen, 2003: 15). Moreover, the European Association of Border Regions views and conceptualizes these territories as "integration laboratories", due to their particular geopolitical placement. The border areas are real barometers for the European integration process (European Commission, 2020: 6).

The integration of border regions is also closely linked to cross-border cooperation, which must be understood as a form of collaboration between at least two entities along the border, transposed into partnership agreements with common objectives. The European Commission has long advocated "the cooperation for development", in order to support disadvantaged border regions (Demetrova, Goodwin-Hawkins, Fischer, 2020: 2289). The European Union's INTERREG initiative, launched in 1990, aimed precisely at improving cooperation between Member States on the basis of objectives defined by the Commission and the main regional actors. The program is the main instrument for implementing EU cohesion policy in border regions and was created to stimulate cooperation between companies and communities on both sides of a border by developing cross-border social and economic centres with common development strategies - Euroregions (Wevers, Voinea, de Langen, 2020: 2; Anderson, Wever, 2003: 33). Since 2007, INTERREG has become the official EU instrument to support territorial cooperation not only in the twenty-eight Member States, but also in developing relations with neighbours (along with IPA, pre-accession programs and European Neighbourhood Instruments) (Demetrova, Goodwin-Hawkins, Fischer, 2020: 5). The sum of approximately 6 billion Euros is allocated to the INTERREG 2014-2020 cross-border programs, which aim to make progress on integration. Investments in joint actions have been planned to improve living conditions and exploit the economic and innovative potential in border regions. Another crucial element focused on smart specialization by stepping up regional and local innovation, including at the cross-border level. The third direction of financing aimed to remove obstacles to investment in order to provide a more favourable environment for cross-border investments (European Commission, 2017: 3).

Despite the progress made in most border areas, some obstacles remain, as cross-border cooperation is still hampered in some areas by existing legal and administrative frameworks at national level, which influence the lives of residents in these areas in aspects such as health, mobility, business, etc. (European Commission, 2020: 5). Numerous studies, conducted and completed over the last 30 years have shown that, despite the political opening of the EU's internal borders, the existence of the common currency and strong support for the development of cross-border relations, geographical, historical, cultural, linguistic, informal and institutional barriers reduce spatial interaction (Anderson, Wever, 2003: 34-35). Moreover, the European Commission also recognizes, for the financial year 2021-2027, the need for measures that go beyond the financial ones, in order to remove these barriers. The new approach to regional development, based on the networking among different urban centres, along with the new trends in development, favour the complementarity and the individualization

of each region. To this end, border regions, due to their geopolitical position, are placed at the centre of European strategies, and cross-border cooperation is seen as a new form of economic organization that contributes to eliminating development disparities (Erkut, Özgen, 2003: 14).

### **Cross-border integration models. Cross-border regions**

The deep integration of border regions or cross-border integration is closely linked to the degree of cross-border cooperation between two areas on either side of the border. Wroblewski defines the concept as a process of intensification of different types of cross-border relations - functional integration, with the involvement of different types of regional actors - institutional integration (Wróblewski, 2020: 5). From this point of view, Durand and Decoville have created a synthetic index of cross-border integration, based on the aggregation of sets of indicators to measure cross-border flows, networks of actors involved in cross-border governance and the identity of communities manifested in the cross-border context. The map obtained by the two researchers shows a wide variety of degrees of integration for the border regions. The highest degree of integration is reached in the Benelux area - northern and eastern France - Germany, followed by Scandinavia. The regions that belong to the implementation area of the INTERREG A program, but are coastal areas (southern Italian territories, Sicily, Sardinia and the coast of Greece, the channel between France and England) have low scores due to the distance, which is a major impediment to flows of individuals and in creating a context of social trust and cooperation. Eastern Europe is located in the section with very low values of this ranking (Durand, Decoville, 2019: 167-175). Based on this methodology, the two researchers established 5 models of cross-border integration for the European Union (Durand, Decoville, 2019: 176):

1. Eastern European, specific to the Baltic States, Romania, northern and southern Poland, eastern Hungary, Slovakia and Greece, is characterized mainly by values below the EU average for indicators of social confidence and low interpenetration of territories adjacent to borders by the population. The involvement of regional actors in the INTERREG program is fairly recent and coincides with the period when Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU;

2. Northern Europe has indicators of mutual social trust at very high levels of and dynamic cross-border cooperation. In contrast, low population density affects the development of cross-border relations and border crossings are reduced. Exceptions are the Norwegian border territories;

3. Maritime - a special category which is distinguished by low levels of cross-border activities, trust in neighbours across borders and the involvement of the authorities in CBC projects, the sea being a difficult barrier to overcome;

4. Western continental, defined by a strong functional integration. The flows are numerous, frequent and almost symmetrical, the social trust is quite high, but the number of actors involved in the CBC is relatively low, despite the high population density in these territories. Representative for this model are the territories on the border between Belgium, Luxembourg and France, as well as on the border between Germany and Austria;

5. South-Western, characterized by weak cross-border activity and a large divergence in the indicator of mutual trust. Portugal, Spain, southern France, western Italy and Croatia are examples that support this model.

Regarding the typology of border regions, in 1994 Martinez identified 4 types of areas adjacent to borders, based on a methodology that measures the intensity of cross-border relations between Mexico and the USA (Martinez, 1994: 6):

- alienated borderlands, characterized by a lack of cross-border cooperation, a consequence of relations between neighbouring states, characterized by open conflicts, political distances, ideological hostilities, cultural differences and impermeable borders;

- coexisting borderlands, which have emerged when open conflicts have ceased, but barriers continue to exist and cooperation is at a minimum;

- interdependent borderlands. In this case, there is a climate of symbiosis between the regions near the border resulting from the institutionalization of cross-border links, an intense movement of people, goods, services and capital, collaborative regional economies and co-dependent border areas;

- integrated borderlands, where the intensity of spatial interaction is very high, living standards are high, the movement of labour, goods, services and capital is free, neighbouring states reject nationalism and adopt cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

Applying the model to the particular case of the European construct, the last category of border regions described by Martinez would have sufficient conditions to materialize. Indeed, the internal market, the euro area and the Schengen area offer many opportunities for cooperation for regions close to internal borders. Given that some Member States are made up only of border regions and one third of Europeans live in these territories, integrated borderlands are a defining element for the European Union to achieve its objectives and become a 'coherent integrative space', as Wróblewski states. However, one should remember that the countries have joined the EU in successive waves, and that, especially in the case of the Central and Eastern European states, the integration process is not fully completed yet. In this case, Wróblewski proposes a fifth stage of spatial interaction, characterized by the full integration of border regions, namely the cross-border region (Wróblewski, 2020: 4).

The model developed by the researcher is based on a classification methodology that relates to the degree of cohesion manifested over a large area and certain characteristics that distinguish it from other types of territories. The model focuses on 5 stages of integration: closed border regions; transitional border regions; open border regions; integrated border regions; cross-border regions. The last type of region is not limited only to an administrative unit of a national territorial system, because it is a functional area that can include two or more regions located along the border that have developed various and intense socio-economic cooperation relations with neighbours. The economy of this type of region involves factors resulting from intense relations between its constituent units (centripetal) and relations with neighbours (centrifuges), in other words endogenous (cross-border cooperation between authorities, cultural ties, social connections and cooperation between business environment, labour market interaction and cross-border mobility) and exogenous (international relations, opening up of national economies, permeability of borders) type (Wróblewski, 2020: 5-11).

Another particular type of border region, also identified by Wróblewski, is that involving developed relations between cities on both sides of the EU's internal borders. Called bridge cities, twin cities, bi-cities or cross-border cities, they are often analysed from the perspective of "barriers and various forms of cross-border cooperation between local authorities, contacts and interactions between residents, social problems and dysfunctions" (Wróblewski, 2020: 3).

The stage of socio-economic development and both functional and institutional integration reached in the model of cross-border region proposed by Wróblewski would allow the construction of a dynamic and complex environment, which would allow the emergence of a multidimensional collective identity, which is different from traditional ones, based on nationality, ethnicity or language. In such a context, stereotypes, understood as the positive or negative image of the other that persists even after the disappearance of territorial borders, would be removed by the social trust obtained through cross-border cooperation (Wielgoths, Lechevalier, 2013: 13).

## **Conclusions**

The phenomenon of globalization has increased the possibilities of contact and has expanded the spatial consciousness of the population communities. In some cases, nation states choose to maintain spatial borders for reasons of safety and protection, for political reasons or with a view of maintaining control and ensure their own position internationally. In border regions study, training, work, health care and conducting business across borders are daily activities that are possible regardless of the degree of permeability of an administrative boundary. Over the last two decades, European integration policy has been heavily influenced by how borders can be crossed, and the deepening of the European integration process has highlighted the importance of border territories. Their significant interconnection through integrated transport systems has increased the mobility of labour, goods, services and capital, so that once considered peripheral areas, border areas are today the main geographical areas where integration processes are part of the daily life of civil society, institutions, the business environment and public authorities. Being the first areas to benefit from the opening of borders, border regions "became places of economic and social exchange and a fertile ground for territorial cooperation and institutional innovation" as stated by Durand and Decoville (Durand, Decoville, 2019: 166).

The budget of the European Union has significantly contributed to the development of border regions, focusing mainly on resolving border difficulties through cross-border cooperation programs, but also disparities and needs in the political, transport, public services and institutional strengthening fields. For their part,

Member States and border regions "must act to prevent the emergence of new obstacles and the resolution of existing ones by coordinating the transposition of EU law, increasing mutual recognition and closer alignment with the neighbouring state" (European Commission, 2017: 17). This strategy, together with the experience gained in cross-border cooperation and the decades of implementation of the INTERREG program have led to the development of cross-border integration models, but the realization of a theory is far from being achieved. The changing nature of the EU's internal borders has contributed to an abundance of interactions between regions on both sides of the border, which are analysed from various perspectives by many researchers. The political model of a borderless world, proposed by Ohmae in 1990, is now complemented by social and cultural dimensions, which transform territories into socio-cultural constructions. Due to cross-border interactions and convergence dynamics, border regions are the spearhead of these edifices, being called by Durand and Decoville "connectivity engines or opportunities offered by the cross-border context" (Durand, Decoville, 2019: 167).

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