

The stability of cooperation in the context of cross-border cooperation: The example of Poland's borderlands

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Abstract

The objective of this paper was to conceptualise the issue of cooperation stability in research on cross-border cooperation. On this basis, regularities related to selected aspects of the stability of cross-border cooperation were identified using the example of the Polish border regions. The analysis was based on a complex review of the Interreg, ETC, ENPI, and ENI cross-border cooperation programmes implemented in the Polish border regions between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, taking into account both internal and external EU borders. The study covered a total of 1,577 projects realised between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 by more than 4,500 beneficiaries, comprising 2,307 organisations. A survey of these organisations was also conducted. The resulting analysis helped to identify the relative stability of partner types and the thematic scope and spatial dimension of cross-border cooperation, while at the same time revealing a lack of stability in the organisational dimension. In addition, the study showed that the initiation and subsequent maintenance of cross-border relationships are the result of a complex process, in which many factors co-exist simultaneously, whereas the break-up of cooperation can be the product of individual factors.

Keywords: Cooperation stability, cross-border cooperation, Interreg projects, borderland, Poland

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1. Introduction

Due to its complexity and multifaceted nature, the issue of borderland development represents a significant research challenge (Wassenberg et al., 2015). Cross-border cooperation, including the implementation of cross-border cooperation programmes, plays a special role in the process of regional and local development. These projects are not the only form of cooperation across borders. However, they are often its most important manifestation (in its actuality, and not just the declarative form of cooperation) and the starting point for the development of other cross-border activities of both a formal and informal nature.

In the European Union (EU), cross-border cooperation projects are largely the result of the established cross-border cooperation policy, which is an important element of the cohesion (Perkmann, 1999) and neighbourhood policy¹. In view of its articulated aspiration to permanently eliminate existing barriers at the borders, adversely affecting the socio-economic space, the issue of stability of cooperation seems particularly important in this context, as it could play a fundamental role in the development of border areas and in overcoming their peripherality in the long term.

It is worth noting that the phenomenon of stability in the cross-border cooperation implemented within the framework of cooperation programmes financed by the EU has thus far been rarely studied, especially in the form of complex, in-depth, and dynamic research. This is probably due to the complexity and ambiguity of the concept of stability itself (especially as it emerges in the field of social sciences), as well as the tendency to study this phenomenon in relation to the cooperation between people, economic entities, or international powers, which rarely takes into account the border context. Moreover, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the phenomenon of stability has a positive or negative impact on the shaping of cooperation.

The main objective of the study was to theoretically consider the possibility of including the issue of cooperation stability in research on cross-border cooperation, with the further goal of conceptualising such a research approach. On this basis, an empirical investigation identified certain regularities related to selected aspects of cross-border cooperation in the Polish borderlands. These regularities were associated with the organisations involved in cooperation, the thematic scope of the projects implemented, their spatial distribution, and the premises underlying the establishment, continuation, or termination of cooperation. This study covers the

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¹ The European Neighbourhood Policy was launched in 2007 with the aim of framing EU relations with those non-EU countries which are bordering the Union but not candidates for accession within a single policy instrument (Celata et al., 2016).

formal cooperation implemented within the framework of cross-border cooperation programmes co-financed by EU funds. Thus, it does not cover the whole range of cross-border cooperation (formal and informal), but concerns a very important aspect of this phenomenon, since, according to Perkmann (1999), Interreg programmes have been a long-standing source of funding for most cross-border cooperation initiatives.

2. Theoretical aspects of cooperation stability

2.1 Cross-border cooperation and its specific characteristics

Cross-border cooperation emerged and became popular as a common strategy for overcoming the divisive role of the border, with the aim of integrating border areas at the national level, but also, and perhaps more importantly, at the regional and local levels. Such cooperation influences the border area and can lead to the creation of cross-border regions stretching outward both sides of the border, which are characterised by strong links of various kinds at many levels, including specific ways of functioning on the part of local authorities, inhabitants, or businesses that reflect these changes in the 'territoriality of border areas' (Popescu, 2011). Cross-border cooperation is generally seen as a positive phenomenon for regional development and European integration (Svensson, 2021) and border region functioning (Böhm, 2023).

Due to its multifaceted character, the issue of cross-border cooperation and the development of border regions constitute an important, extensive, and interdisciplinary research topic (i.e. Brunet-Jailly, 2005; Jones, 2009; Popescu, 2011; Prokkola, 2019; Chilla & Lambrecht, 2023). A significant strand of research on cooperation is devoted to the influence of borders on the development of border regions, including the factors that limit its negative effects (i.e. Evrard, 2022). Research emphasising the role of the border as a resource is also important (Sohn, 2014), including in the field of tourism (Timothy & Więckowski, 2023). Regarding these factors, various economic flows have been indicated as important in terms of shaping stability, prosperity, and territorial cohesion (Decoville & Durand, 2016). At the same time, many studies emphasise the specificity of border regions, which is reflected in the fact that even numerous and strong interactions do not necessarily lead to an increase in the convergence and degree of similarity of border regions (Topaloglu et al., 2005). Related to this is the problem of asymmetry of border areas in various socio-economic dimensions (Leimgruber, 2005; Dołzbłasz, 2015).

Taking into account the approach of Durand and Decoville (2020), the implementation of cross-border cooperation projects can be regarded as one of the key components of the process of cross-border integration. At the same time, it should be remembered that this process is complex and multifaceted and may manifest differently in individual borderlands. This is in line with the observation by Anderson and O'Dowd (1999) that every border region is unique, and borders and their roles often produce dissimilar meanings in individual countries (Paasi & Ferdoush, 2023). According to Durand and Decoville (2020), the essential components of this process include the functional dimension of cross-border integration (e.g. cross-border practices), the ideational dimension (e.g. the level of mutual social trust between border populations), and the institutional dimension (e.g. the involvement of stakeholders in cross-border cooperation projects). Thus, the study of cross-border cooperation projects implemented under the EU's cohesion policy falls under the third component mentioned above.

The studies conducted so far indicate that there is no single universal pattern governing cross-border cooperation development (Durand & Decoville, 2020) and its diversity (Kaucic & Sohn, 2022).

The observed variety of factors that are relevant to the development of cross-border territories (e.g. formal-legal, cultural, economic, etc.) could, therefore, potentially influence different attitudes of organisations towards cross-border cooperation, including the motives for its establishment, further continuation, and perceived benefits or barriers to its implementation. Identifying these attitudes and motivations of organisations, therefore, seems important, as they can significantly alter the course of integration processes (Borges et al., 2022).

Moreover, it is worth noting that the nature of cross-border cooperation is such that it does not emerge overnight, but is instead the effect of long-term processes that are of an integrative and disintegrative nature (i.e. Blatter, 2004; Wassenberg et al., 2015). This confirms the viability of studying the phenomenon of cooperation stability from a longer-term perspective and its impact on cross-border cooperation, both in its positive and negative dimensions.

2.2 The issue of cooperation stability

According to Pena Suarez (2012), understanding the emergence and stability of cooperation is a central issue in many areas of both the natural and social sciences. As a result, studies on this topic have been carried out in several scientific disciplines (e.g. economics, management, psychology, political science, sociology, and biological sciences) and using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods. At the same time, there is no single, generally accepted, or even well-established definition of cooperation stability in the literature. Among the existing studies on this topic, a very broad strand covers the behaviour of individuals and human groups, addressing, among other things, the propensity for interpersonal cooperation (Számadó et al., 2016; Reigstad et al., 2017), cooperation between scientists (Cainelli et al., 2012), psycho-economic reasons for making the decision to cooperate (Berger & Grüne, 2016), cooperation in the field of public goods (Fischbacher & Gächter, 2010; Lankau et al., 2012), and the role of evolutionary biology (Smith & Price, 1973; Taylor & Nowak, 2007). Another important strand of research is devoted to the analysis of the stability of company cooperation (i.e. Windsor, 2007; Hatak et al., 2015), cooperation in the field of R&D (i.e. Atallah, 2003; Zeng et al., 2017) as well as stability of cooperation between countries within the framework of organisations and international treaties (i.e. Langlois & Langlois, 2001; Baciú, 2020).

At the same time, the concept of stability is understood in very different ways. One of the pioneers in the study of cooperation stability was Axelrod (1984), who used game theory to show that it is largely determined by an unlimited number of interactions (i.e. the permanence of mutual relationships). This explains why the importance of subsequent interactions between the same partners becomes so high that the strategy of non-cooperation becomes unprofitable. In this context, the basis for cooperation is therefore the permanence of relationships. In contrast, an alternative approach was presented by Bendor and Swistak (1997), who proposed that stability refers to the ability of a given system to return to its initial state after a subtle disturbance. In this sense, the strength of stability is measured by the amount of disturbance it can withstand. It is worth noting that in the social science research, stability is often understood in the common sense of the relative permanence of different dimensions of cooperation over time (e.g. of the subject or the object of cooperation). Moreover, in many cases, the research in this area makes use of theoretical and empirical models based on game theory (i.e. Axelrod, 1984; Conlon, 2003; Nax et al., 2015).

The results of Axelrod's (1984) research show that the stability of cooperation, understood as its recurrence, is an integral condition for the development of cooperation itself. Thus, under the right conditions, stable cooperation can develop, even between

antagonists. Particularly important from this point of view seems to be the research by Reigstad et al. (2017), which confirms the existence of a stable behavioural inclination towards prosociality (or the 'cooperative phenotype') and provides an argument for the relative stability of people's cooperative behaviour across countries and over time.

In studies of people's behaviour, Lankau et al. (2012) found that the temporal stability of preferences for the provision of public goods is highly dependent on the social environment. This is particularly true for people with the same identity, who show much higher levels of cooperation than those without such an identity. The willingness to cooperate can therefore be systematically increased by enhancing the perceived sense of belonging to the group with which one interacts. Similarly, a significant sense of identity has also been observed in the area of international cooperation between countries (Sommer et al., 2008). For instance, Jafroudi (2018) treats the stability of cooperation as the basis for the effectiveness of international policies implemented through interstate agreements. The most effective mechanisms available to prevent withdrawal from cooperation appear to be high exit barriers, such as those in the form of reputational damage, the implementation of countermeasures, or the use of dispute settlement measures. According to Gaudeul et al. (2017), if the exit barriers are low, this poses a threat to group coherence, as it encourages units to attach more importance to their own short-lived particular interests than to strengthening the goals of the community.

Despite the extensive literature on the subject, as Reigstad et al. (2017) have pointed out, relatively little research has been devoted to verifying the extent to which the willingness to cooperate is stable under different conditions and over time. An example of such an approach would be Cainelli et al.'s (2012) network analysis of publication cooperation among scientists in different time periods, or Reigstad et al.'s (2017) analysis of changes over time in the willingness to cooperate among people in different countries of the world.

2.3 Stability of cross-border cooperation

In relation to borderlands, the issue of stability has mainly been raised in the field of border stability within political geography and geopolitics (i.e. Berg & Kim, 2016; Carter & Poast, 2017). Although cross-border comparative studies have been conducted in various border regions (i.e. Dołzbłasz & Raczyk 2015), research on the stability of cooperation is poorly represented in the literature. Meanwhile, as Wassenberg et al. (2015) noted, the rules of cooperation at the EU level are organised in a similar way for all territorially interested partners, which creates favourable conditions for dynamic studies.

Studies that have focused on the issue of stability have been most often concerned with cross-border infrastructure networks or the cross-border management of environmental resources (mostly water resources, such as rivers with a cross-border character; see Dinar et al., 2019). In general, there have been no in-depth analyses of the stability of cooperation in joint cross-border projects implemented by public organisations and the non-governmental sector. Moreover, there have been relatively few studies on the issue of long-lasting partnerships in the cross-border cooperation projects (i.e. Szmigiel-Rawska, 2013) or factors influencing continuation of cooperation (Raczyk & Dołzbłasz, 2022). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that selected aspects of cooperation stability have appeared in some border studies, specifically in relation to trust and the ease of implementing activities (van Houtum, 1998; Capello et al., 2018), the sustainability of the institutional system (i.e. Blatter, 2004; Biot, 2013), the importance of stable conditions (Karppi, 2001), and the long-term effects of cooperation (Scott, 2003).

In response to a number of phenomena that negatively affect the development of border regions and cross-border cooperation (e.g. geopolitical problems or the COVID-19 pandemic), the concept of resilience has recently become popular in border studies (Prokkola, 2019; Böhm, 2021; Hippe et al., 2022). In general, the concept refers to the ability to accommodate shocks and to move back to pre-shock conditions (Prokkola, 2019). Therefore, this approach seems to clearly correspond to the definition of stability proposed by Bendor and Swistak (1997). However, adopting such a perspective to study the phenomenon of stability limits it only to emergency (crisis) situations, which does not fully reflect its essence, as understood by Axelrod (1984), who appropriately focused on the study of the relevant relationships (within successive, consecutive interactions).

Given the lack of clear definitions of the stability of cross-border cooperation in the literature, for the purposes of this study, the authors have adopted an approach that is an adaptation of the concept presented by Axelrod (1984) to the field of border studies. It should be noted, however, that this concept should be understood as a starting point for studies on cooperation in the broader sense. The starting point for defining the stability of cross-border cooperation was the EU cross-border cooperation policy, which is an important component of the EU's cohesion policy. In this case, to fully understand cross-border relations, it is important to know who cooperates with whom, what happens within this cooperation, and where it takes place. These categories are closely related, and their joint analysis increases the effectiveness of the analyses of cross-border cooperation (Chilla & Lambracht, 2023). Thus, in this understanding, stability refers to the existence of stable spatial structures, stable subjects of cooperation, and stable consortia implementing joint cross-border projects.

On this basis, it has been assumed in this article that the stability of cross-border cooperation is to be understood as a certain level of recurrence of cooperation, which is itself to be understood, however, not only in terms of the category of recurring interactions themselves (as stated by Axelrod, 1984), but also in terms of the recurrence of various elements that significantly influence these relations, which include the following (Fig. 1):

- Recurrence of partners (including project consortia) and motivation for partner selection;
- Recurrence of the cooperation theme (e.g. thematic scope) and motivation for its selection;
- Recurrence of the spatial structures of the cooperation (i.e. the locations of the organisations involved in the cooperation) and motivations for participating in the cooperation according to its location.

In the context of the existing body of literature, the stability of cross-border cooperation should, by definition, not be treated as an unambiguously positive or negative phenomenon but, above

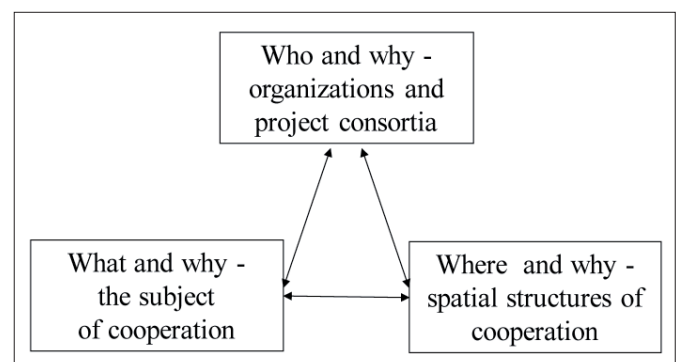


Fig. 1: Concept of the stability of cross-border cooperation
Source: Authors' conceptualisation

all, as a phenomenon that allows for a better understanding of the mechanisms of its functioning. This has been the approach adopted by the authors of this study.

3. Study method and sources

The present analysis of the stability of cross-border cooperation was based on an examination of all the cross-border cooperation programmes approved for implementation under the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) 2007–2013, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) 2007–2013, Interreg 2014–2020, and the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) 2014–2020². The study covered a total of 1,577 projects realised between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 and implemented by more than 4,500 beneficiaries³, comprising 2,307 organisations.

The analysis focused on Polish border areas running on both sides of the land borders. The maritime border was not included due to the fact that it has distinct characteristics resulting from, among other things, the long distances between the cooperating countries. For the purposes of the stability analysis, the following factors were examined (Fig. 1):

- Recurrence of cooperation partners⁴ (who);
- Recurrence of cooperation subject (what);
- Repetition of spatial structures of cooperation (where);
- Motivation for the choice of partners (taking into account their type and location) and the motivation for the choice of thematic scope (why).

The recurrence of cooperation partners was defined on the basis of the recurrence of organisations involved in the cooperation and the types of these organisations (Fig. 1, 'Who'). Overall, this study was based on a statistical analysis of all the organisations involved in cooperation projects, which were divided into three groups: the Polish units, the other EU countries (Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Lithuania) and the non-EU countries (Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia). The list of organisations was obtained from the databases of the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, the technical secretariats of the programmes examined, and the

Keep.eu database developed within the INTERACT programme. For the purpose of the analysis, the authors classified organisations into formal and legal categories (Fig. 2).

With regard to the recurrence of the cooperation theme (Fig. 1, 'What'), the study was based on the statistical analysis of all the projects approved for implementation, and the thematic scope of the projects was defined in accordance with the classification of intervention categories for EU funds, which was slightly modified for the purposes of this study. All the projects were attributed to the 2007–2013 categories (OJ L 371, 27.12.2006) by the authors on the basis of the actual (and financially dominant) thematic scope of the projects implemented. This was due to the fact that in the Keep.eu database, projects were declared by partners, which did not always reflect the actual nature of the project. The analyses were carried out in two groups of projects: those implemented in border areas along the internal EU border and those implemented along the external EU border.

Regarding the recurrence of the spatial structures of cooperation (Fig. 1, 'Where'), the study was based on a spatial analysis of the location of all the beneficiaries involved in the cooperation projects. The location was defined on the basis of the headquarters of each organisation. Finally, the analysis of the motivations for the choice of partners and the thematic scope (Fig. 1, 'Why') was conducted using the computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) technique. The study was conducted at the turn of the year 2021/2022. As a result, responses were obtained from 262 organisations, which accounted for 11.4% of all units included in the study. This value included only fully completed surveys, as partially completed surveys were rejected.

4. Results

4.1 Stability of organisations involved in cooperation

According to the model of the stability of cross-border cooperation adopted in the study, the first dimension of cooperation that was examined was the recurrence of organisations involved in cooperating in both adopted programming periods. Out of

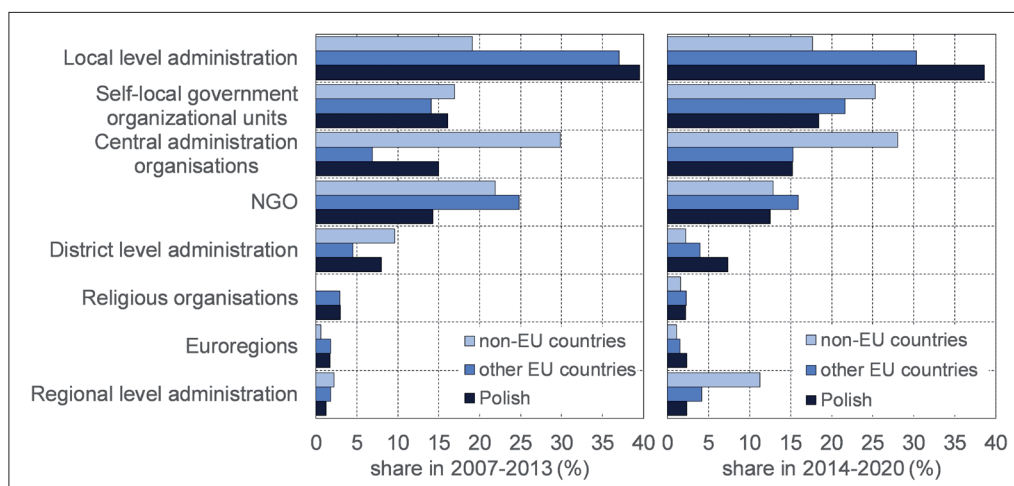


Fig. 2: Formal-legal structure of organisations participating in cross-border cooperation programmes in the Polish borderlands between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020. Source: Authors' survey

² The analysis of projects between 2007–2013 covered the following ETC programmes: Mecklenburg–Vorpommern/Brandenburg–Poland, Poland–Brandenburg, Poland–Saxony, Czech Republic–Poland, Poland–Slovak Republic, and Poland–Lithuania. The following ENPI projects were also examined: Poland–Belarus–Ukraine and Lithuania–Poland–Russia. The analysis of projects in 2014–2020, in turn, covered the following ETC programmes: Mecklenburg–Vorpommern/Brandenburg–Poland, Brandenburg–Poland, Poland–Saxony, Czech Republic–Poland, Poland–Slovakia, and Lithuania–Poland. The ENI projects Poland–Belarus–Ukraine and Poland–Russia were also included in the study.

³ 'Beneficiary' here means a public or private entity responsible for the implementation of an operation (or the implementation of a project; OJ L 347/320, 20/12.2013). In practice, this means that the same organisation can be multiple beneficiaries implementing a variety of projects.

⁴ Partners in the text are understood as cooperating organisations.

the 2,307 organisations involved in cooperation projects, only 469 were present in both programming periods (about 19%). This is due to the fact that around 70% of organisations participated in only one cooperation project between 2007–2020. The number of organisations involved in a larger number of projects was relatively low (only 16% of organisations were involved in two projects and 14% in more than two projects). In this context, we can speak of the very low stability of the cross-border organisational system. In terms of country of origin, the level of recurrence of organisations was relatively similar for Polish organisations (22%) and the rest of the EU countries (19%). However, this level was significantly lower in non-EU countries (10%), which could be attributed to the strong influence of the formal-legal barriers typical of the external borders of the EU and the Schengen area.

Another dimension of stability taken into account was the recurrence of the types of organisations in terms of their formal-legal structures. These structures were quite similar in both programming periods (Fig. 2), and their common feature was the clear dominance of local self-government and the relatively small significance of NGOs. In terms of the countries of origin of the organisations in the study, a number of characteristic differences could be identified. In the group of Polish units, local governments were relatively more important, while NGOs played a slightly greater role among foreign organisations from EU member states and central administration units among foreign organisations from non-EU countries. Thus, the observed structure of the organisations partly reflects (1) the roles and competences of particular administrative levels in these countries with regard to the implementation of public policies, and (2) the level of development of civil society and the organisational capacity of this sector.

4.2 Stability of the cooperation theme

The stability of the cooperation theme was examined by analysing the thematic scope of the cooperation projects in both programming periods (Fig. 3). In the thematic structure of the implemented projects, the most important role was played by projects related to tourism, transport, culture, social infrastructure, human capital, and various types of events. The structure of projects implemented at the EU's internal borders was broadly similar in both programming periods. However, there have been significant changes in the EU's external borders. This was due to the evolution of the scope of cooperation, which consisted of a reduction in the share of strictly infrastructural categories (e.g. water supply in the environmental category and

community centres in the social infrastructure category). This was accompanied by an increase in the importance of the 'soft' projects (e.g. those in the areas of human capital, social inclusion, and institutional capacity building). The observed changes partly reflect a cooperation policy geared towards improving the cross-border impact (i.e. benefiting the whole cross-border region and being felt on both sides of the border).

Based on the analysis of the recurrence of cooperation theme, we can speak of the relative stability of cross-border cooperation, but this was limited to the internal borders of the EU. At the external borders, significant and meaningful changes in the scope of cooperation could be observed as a result of the constant evolution of its character. It is important to note that at both the internal and external borders, the main thematic categories were similar and included tourism, transport, social infrastructure, and events. In addition, human capital projects played an important role at the EU's external borders. It therefore appears that these main recurring categories formed a permanent core of cross-border cooperation and may continue to shape its character, even in the future.

4.3 Stability of spatial structures

Another dimension considered in this study was the stability of spatial structures. This dimension was examined in relation to the locations of the beneficiaries of cross-border cooperation projects, as presented by localities. This study included beneficiaries because they reflect the activity of individual organisations (i.e. the number of projects they have implemented) and, consequently, the activity of specific regions of the border area. The use of the category of beneficiaries made it possible to show the number of projects carried out by each organisation, as they could be beneficiaries of cross-border cooperation programmes several times.

The analysis of beneficiaries by locality showed that although only one-third of localities recurred in both programming periods, these localities accounted for 70% of all beneficiaries. This was due to the fact that the recurring localities formed key nodes in spatial cooperation structures (Fig. 4), where cross-border activities were carried out by a number of organisations. These were usually urban centres that played an important role in the socioeconomic life of the border area (e.g. due to the location of regional administrations offices or higher education schools). Moreover, some localities stood out from the others, as they were more prone to cooperation due to their specificity (e.g. cities divided by state borders, such as Zgorzelec–Goerlitz, Slubice–Frankfurt, and Gubin–Guben) or those located closest to the border (e.g. Kudowa Zdrój, Náchod, Puns, and Brest).

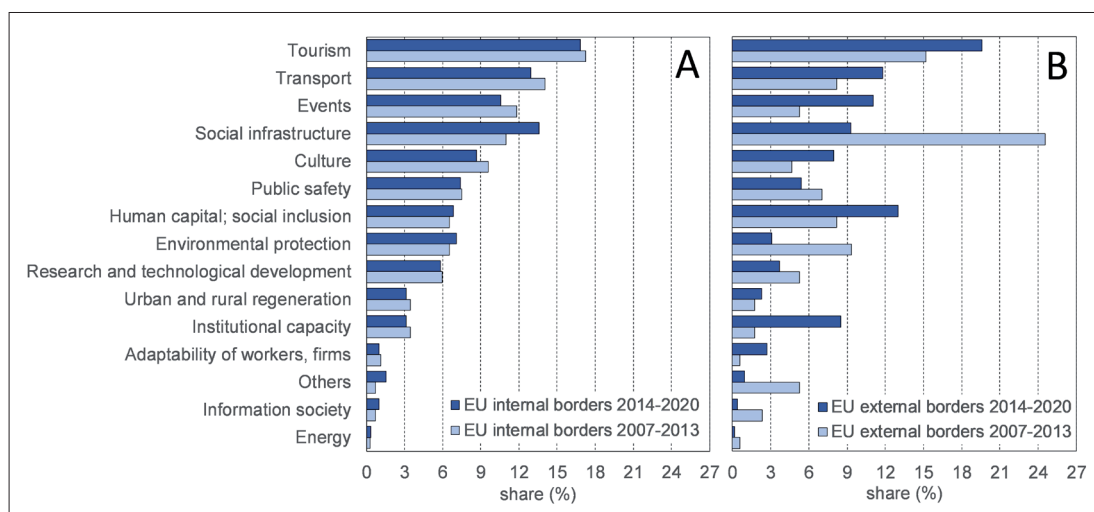


Fig. 3: Cross-border cooperation projects implemented in Polish borderlands between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 along the internal (A) and external EU borders (B)

Source: Authors' survey

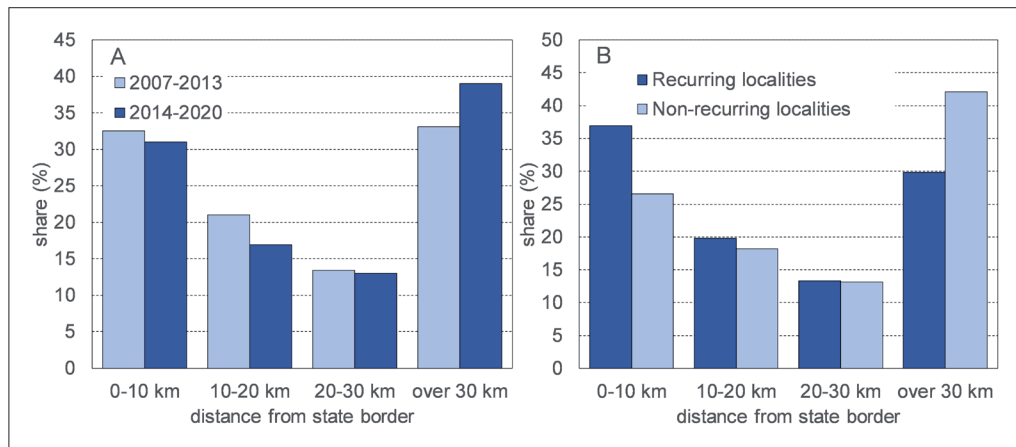


Fig. 4: Structure of localities with beneficiaries of cross-border cooperation programmes (A), as well as recurring and non-recurring localities (B), in 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 in Poland's borderlands by distance from the state border

Source: Authors' survey

The spatial structures of the most important localities (in terms of the number of beneficiaries located within them) were quite similar in both programming periods. At the same time, they formed the backbone of the spatial cooperation structures, which were relatively permanent foundations around which other projects of a less permanent nature were implemented, the latter of which occurred only in one period. Although, as mentioned above, the beneficiaries of cooperation in these localities changed between the two programming periods, this did not have a significant impact on the overall spatial pattern of cooperation.

In the spatial dimension, a decrease in the number of beneficiaries was observed with an increase in the distance from the border (Fig. 4). This phenomenon was studied here in relation to the adopted zones of distance from the border of up to 10 km, 10–20 km, 20–30 km, and over 30 km. More than 30% of the localities were located in the first zone, while 20%, 15%, and 35% were located in the subsequent zones, respectively. Therefore, in this last zone, the factor of proximity to the border did not play a significant role in the establishment of cross-border links. In this zone, the beneficiaries were mostly located in large cities (e.g. Dresden, Lublin, Przemysl, Wroclaw, Uzhhorod, Lviv, Vilnius, or Olomouc), with significant institutional capacities facilitating cooperation even over considerable distances (e.g. numerous public organisations or scientific institutions).

The observed spatial regularities in the distribution of beneficiaries were stable during both programming periods (Fig. 4, Fig. 5). This suggests that the factor of proximity to the border played a significant, stabilising role. This is supported by the observation that in the immediate vicinity of the border, there were definitely more recurrent localities in both periods, and together with an increase in the distance from the border, there was a clear increase in the non-recurrent localities (Fig. 4). At the same time, non-recurring localities predominated in border areas along the external borders of the EU. This may indicate the influence of the nature of the border (in this case, its high degree of formalisation) on the stability of cooperation (Fig. 5).

This study also examined whether the importance of the localities, measured by the number of beneficiaries located within them, was similar in both periods. The correlation between the number of beneficiaries of cross-border cooperation programmes in each locality between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 was found to be positive and relatively high (+ 0.752). At the same time, in such a case, even the instability of the beneficiaries themselves (e.g. as a result of the exchange of organisations involved in cooperation in subsequent programming periods) did not lead to the instability of the spatial structures of cooperation (which was measured at

the level of localities). This demonstrates the relatively stable activity of the most prominent localities in the development of cross-border relations.

Taking into account the results of the research, the spatial structures of cooperation seem to be stable in terms of localities, particularly pronounced in areas in close proximity to the border. And in the case of areas farther away – in regard to the localities most important for cooperation (e.g. major cities).

At the same time, it is worth noting that along the external EU borders, the spatial distribution of the organisations involved in cooperation was much more concentrated, thereby affecting the largest towns in the border area, as well as localities close to border crossings. The proximity of the border itself (apart from the border crossings) did not affect the intensity of cooperation due to its highly formalised nature. In such cases, organisations located in larger urban centres and those with good transport links to organisations in neighbouring countries found it easiest to establish cross-border relations. However, along the EU's internal borders, the spatial structure of the beneficiaries of cooperation was highly dispersed due to the limited formalisation of the state borders.

4.4 Motivation for the choice of partners, scope, and location of cooperation

Another important dimension of the research on partner stability was the analysis of the motivations to establish, continue, or discontinue cooperation, taking into account the issues of the partners themselves, as well as the scope and location of cooperation. This analysis was based on a research survey of organisations, of which 56.9% were Polish organisations, 34.7% were organisations from other EU countries (Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Lithuania), and 8.4% were organisations from non-EU countries (Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia).

According to the respondents, among the most important factors for establishing cooperation in all types of border areas, the community of objectives played the most dominant role (selected in over 70% of responses; Fig. 6). Spatial accessibility to the partner (around 50%) was also very important, allowing for more frequent direct interactions. This factor corresponds to Axelrod's (1984) observation that an important condition for the establishment and stability of mutual relationships between partners is their frequency (recurrence). It should be noted that, contrary to the results of this study, in the case of cross-border cooperation, the frequency of relationships alone may not have been sufficient to establish cooperation unless accompanied by other factors, such as the shared objectives mentioned above. Expected benefits (material and non-material) also played an

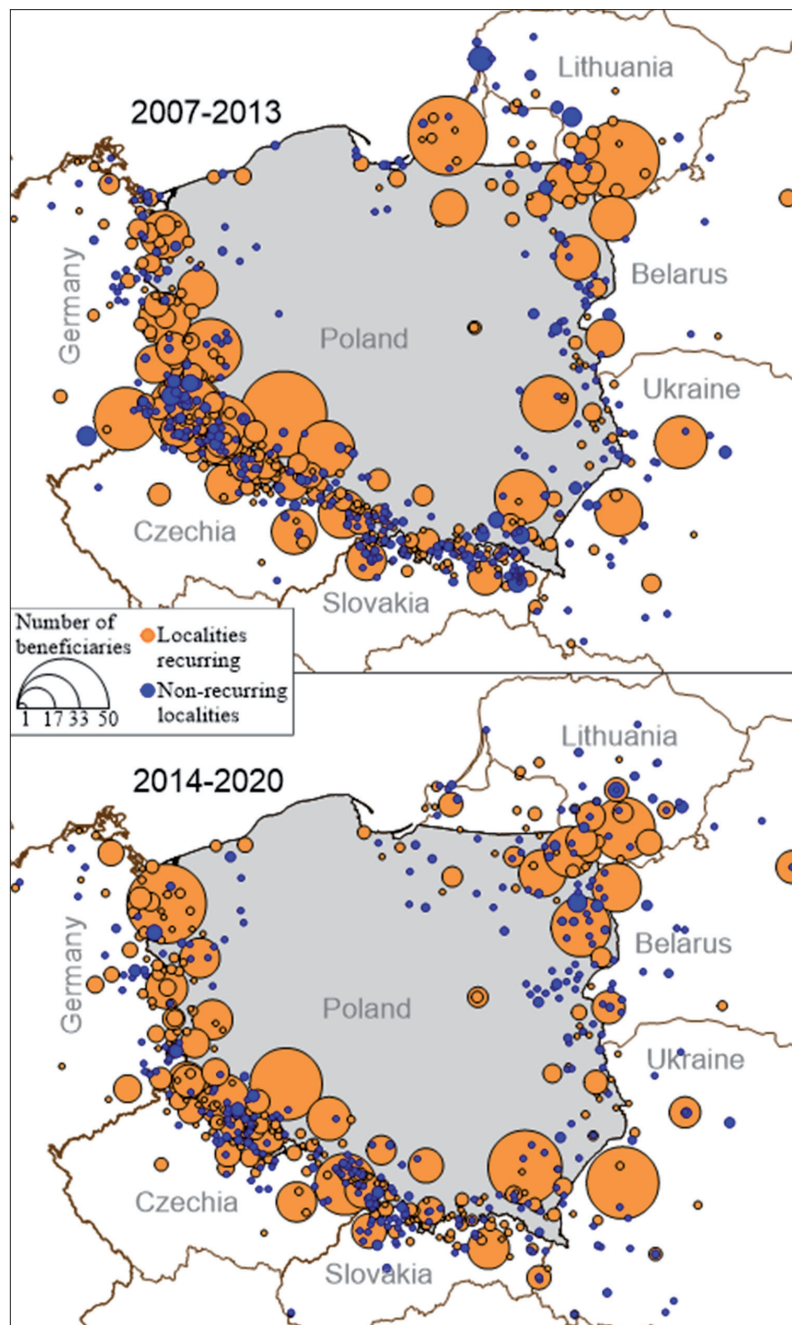


Fig. 5: Localities by the number of beneficiaries of cross-border cooperation projects implemented in Polish borderlands, both recurring and non-recurring, between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020

Source: Authors' elaboration

important role, which were most often organisational benefits and less often community benefits (e.g. local community integration). Personal contacts were also highly significant.

In light of the results obtained, the establishment of cross-border relations with a particular partner for the purpose of implementing a joint project was most often the result of the complex interaction of a number of premises, rather than the impact of a single factor.

The average number of stated premises was five for Polish organisations and about six for organisations from neighbouring states. This shows that the establishment of cross-border cooperation should be understood as a multifaceted and internally complex process, which, by definition, is relatively difficult to freely shape within a cooperation policy. At the same time, although the process reflects the very different objectives of individual organisations, in most cases, they are not mutually exclusive, but

can be mutually supportive in a synergistic way. In this context, the main challenge seemed to be combining organisational benefits with those of the community at large.

From the point of view of the stability of cross-border relations, some of the premises identified seemed to favour stability (e.g. geographical stability or previous cooperation), while others did not (e.g. expected benefits for the organisation). Thus, the achievement of stable relations seems to depend to a large extent on the nature of the common objectives underpinning this cooperation – that is, to what extent they are long-term, and to what extent they are temporary (or even accidental).

Among the factors that influenced the partners of projects implemented between 2007–2013 to continue this cooperation in the following programming period (2014–2020), positive experiences from the previous period played a decisive role (selected

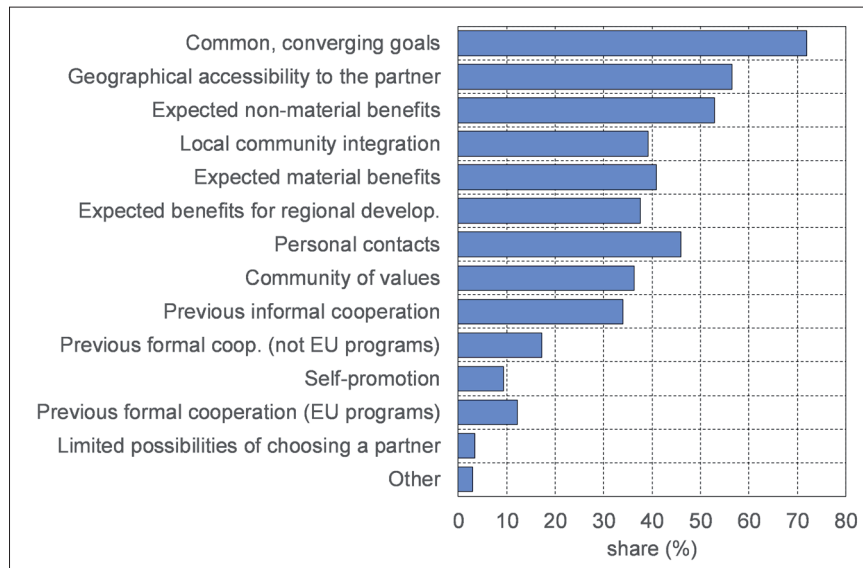


Fig. 6: Premises of establishing cooperation according to organisations participating in cross-border cooperation projects implemented in the Polish borderlands between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020

Source: Authors' survey

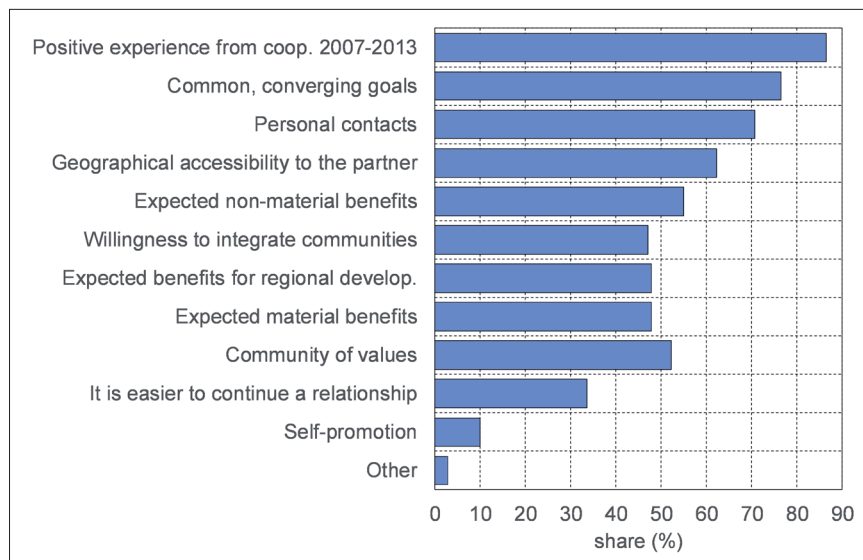


Fig. 7: Premises of continuation of cooperation established between 2007–2013 and continued between 2014–2020, according to organisations participating in cross-border cooperation projects implemented in the Polish borderlands

Source: Authors' survey

in over 86% of the responses; Fig. 7). Therefore, the more successful the projects were from the point of view of all the participating organisations, the greater the likelihood of further joint activities in the future. Notably, a group of eight prominent factors for establishing cooperation (Fig. 6) also played a key role in their continuation (Fig. 7). At the same time, the combined importance of these factors was, in all cases, even greater for the continuation of cooperation, with an analogous hierarchy of importance to the establishment of cooperation. This confirms the special role of the identified premises in shaping cooperation at different stages. It also suggests that the formulation of cooperation policies aimed at strengthening the group of premises serves both to establish and maintain cross-border relations. The relative similarity of the premises for establishing and maintaining cooperation may also suggest that the barriers (constraints) to cooperation are the most important premises in determining whether established relationships will continue in the future.

In this context, particular attention should be paid to the factor of personal contact, which was much more important for maintaining cooperation than for establishing it (by 19 percentage

points). This probably reflects the high importance of mutual trust and the intensity of informal relations. For this reason, the implementation of joint projects should aim to strengthen informal interpersonal contacts, as they significantly improve the conditions for further continuation of cooperation. At the same time, however, the fact that the cooperation of organisations is based on the relationships of individual persons only poses a serious threat to their stability in situations where these persons disappear (e.g. after termination of employment). Thus, the creation of a network of personal relationships that is numerous (on the scale of a particular organisation) and resistant to random events and the natural phenomenon of staff turnover could affect the stability of cross-border relations.

Approximately one-third of respondents highlighted the importance of being able to continue existing relationships rather than starting new ones from scratch. This factor, therefore, favours the stability of cross-border relationships. However, it could also be linked to organisational inertia. It is, therefore, difficult to say unequivocally whether this factor has a positive or negative impact on cross-border cooperation in the long term.

With regard to the premises identified by the respondents as being responsible for the lack of continuation of cooperation, the low number of premises is noticeable (at around two). To establish or continue with cooperation, many factors had to occur simultaneously (i.e. more than five). However, only a few factors were needed for cooperation to cease. In other words, the premises identified by the respondents as conditioning the lack of cooperation were most often those that definitely excluded further activity. This fact seems to clearly explain the low repeatability of the organisations involved in cooperation.

Non-continuity of cooperation was found to be mainly related to financial issues, and mostly an entity's own insufficient resources to finance or co-finance joint ventures (reflected in over 24% of responses; Fig. 8). A group of six factors with similar shares also played a significant role (12–16%). This group included formal issues that were mostly related to restrictions or changes in the thematic scope of support, the eligibility of expenditure, the functioning of project consortia, or the fact of not receiving support from EU funds. Premises in this group include those related to a change in the priorities of the cooperating organisations, differences between their objectives and working methods, and limitations in the scope of human resources.

Among the factors identified, language, which is often described in the academic literature as an important barrier to cross-border cooperation (Medeiros, 2018), was relatively insignificant. This is due to the fact that the study examined organisations involved in cooperation, which would have had to overcome this barrier before.

5. Conclusions

This research has shown that, in general, while there is relative stability in the types of partners, thematic scopes, and spatial dimensions of cross-border cooperation, there is instability in organisational terms. In addition, this study has revealed that the establishment and subsequent maintenance of cross-border relationships are the result of a complex process in which several factors simultaneously co-exist. What seems to be significant is that the set of conditions that are important for establishing and maintaining cooperation is relatively similar. At the same time, very few premises (one or two) seem to be required for cooperation with a given partner to break down (e.g. a lack of financial sources). These results, therefore, illustrate the relative fragility of cross-

border relations and show that cross-border cooperation, in its formal dimension, is characterised by an inherent lack of stability, with stability here understood as the repeatability of cooperation partners. This is in line with previous findings indicating a low level of organisational stability, as well as partnership stability, in cross-border cooperation projects financed by EU funds. At the same time, it appears that the low level of repeatability of cross-border relationships can be partly explained by low exit barriers, which are a typical feature of cross-border cooperation projects. Low exit barriers could be the result of a low sense of identity and community in border regions (Gaudeul et al., 2017). Under such conditions, the strength of social control (which increases barriers to exit) is usually low (Jafroudi, 2018).

On the basis of the above conclusions, it can be stated that the cross-border cooperation policy, regardless of the level at which it is formulated, should support all the factors that influence its establishment and continuation (not just certain ones) in a complex way. Moreover, it should address all the main barriers to such cooperation. Additionally, it must also take into account the observed instability of cooperation between organisations. For this reason, the most important cooperation nodes in specific border regions are crucial, as they have the highest potential for fostering stability (Dołzbłasz & Raczyk, 2021). In this context, a broader discussion should be held on the most desirable model of development for cross-border cooperation – whether it be based on supporting the most stable cooperation nodes, or perhaps focus on incorporating the highest possible number of new organisations, which would lead to instability of the organisational set-up involved in cross-border relations. Perhaps the most beneficial solution would be to adopt a hybrid model, combining, on the one hand, the existence of a small number of main cooperation nodes that have been stable over time, and, on the other hand, a large group of organisations involved in cross-border projects on a more sporadic basis.

The research conducted here shows that cross-border cooperation in Polish border areas can be described as partially stable in terms of the subject of cooperation, which is limited only to the thematic categories selected as the most popular (e.g. tourism, transport, events, and culture). It is important to note that among the group of reasons for starting and continuing cooperation, those focused on achieving the organisation's own objectives, rather than those of the community as a whole, dominated. This situation can be

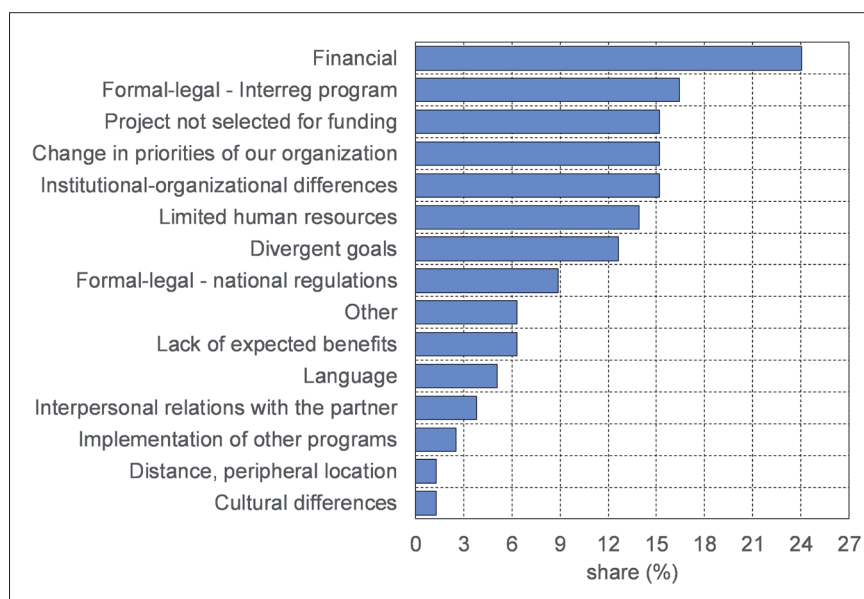


Fig. 8: Premises of discontinuation of cooperation in the next programming period (2014–2020) according to organisations participating in cross-border cooperation projects implemented in Polish borderlands between 2007–2013

Source: Authors' survey

explained by the low sense of community and low barriers to exit typical of border regions (Gaudeul et al., 2017).

From a spatial point of view, an overall stability of the general distribution of beneficiaries was observed, including the repeatability of localities. This phenomenon occurred despite the instability of the organisations themselves, which were the beneficiaries of the cooperation projects. The stability of the spatial distribution was determined by the distance from the border and its nature (i.e. it differed at the internal and external EU borders). In this context, it seems justified to carry out further research on the question of which dimension of stability is the most important for the shaping of cross-border cooperation: the stability of the subject of cooperation, its spatial structures, or the partners. Furthermore, it is critical to examine the extent to which the importance of these dimensions differs across border areas. Studies of border regions generally do not offer a single, universal pattern for the development of cross-border cooperation. This is partly due to the fact that cooperation is shaped differently in various border regions, as the entities involved in this cooperation are set in diverse conditions that are hardly comparable (Leibenath & Knippschild, 2005). Irrespective of whether the stability of cooperation in border regions is universal or perhaps more specific (unique) in nature, it appears to be worth investigating.

The results of this study are in line with the conceptualisation presented by Axelrod (1984), who pointed to the importance of the frequency and recurrence (as well as the inevitability) of mutual interactions as a prerequisite of shaping stable cooperation. Recurrence in border areas is most likely to occur in the immediate vicinity of the border and decreases with the distance from it. The influence of spatial proximity on the shaping of relationships has also been underlined in other studies (e.g. Boehmer & Peña, 2012). Moreover, the repetitiveness of mutual interactions can be conditioned by the institutional potential of individual localities and their position in the functional-spatial connections in each border area. This explains the role of large towns, even those farther away from the border, in generating cooperation. Boehmer and Peña (2012) are among those who have pointed out the importance of major urban centres in intensifying cross-border links. In terms of the stability of the cooperation theme, it was associated with the most popular categories and accessible to a considerable number of different organisations.

It is worth noting that, as shown by Van Der Zwet and Vironen (2013, p. 247), cooperation programmes constitute a continuous learning process, and continuity, stability, and maturity are key factors of territorial integration. At the same time, as noted by Van Houtum (1998), the stability of cooperation can lead to its 'decay' and the so-called 'lock-in' mechanism, which reduces the elasticity and creativity of entities involved in cooperation. Thus, in the implementation of cross-border cooperation, it may be useful to strike a balance between the needs for both elasticity and stability (Biot, 2013).

6. Limitations of the study

It should be taken into account that the analysis was based on a study of cross-border cooperation projects co-financed with EU funds. These projects represent one (albeit the most important) of many different forms of cooperation. Hence, the study does not take into account, among others, company cooperation, informal relations between people, European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, and the conclusions of the study therefore apply only to cross-border projects. The stability of cooperation, for example, of companies or people, may be driven by different rules.

A major problem is the lack of a single definition of the concept of stability, which makes it difficult to conceptualise it in relation to cooperation, including cross-border cooperation in particular.

Although all cooperation projects in the analysed borderlands were included in the study, the conclusions drawn from the survey were based on 262 complete responses (from 11.4% of all organisations). The surveyed population may not be fully representative of all organisations, e.g. by the fact that there may be an overrepresentation of entities actively working in the field of cooperation.

In the study, the spatial dimension of cooperation was examined in relation to the location of organisations implementing joint projects. The location of project activities was not taken into account due to the lack of available data in this aspect.

Due to the peculiarities of border areas (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999; Paasi & Ferdoush, 2023), the observed regularities may be somewhat different in the borderlands of other countries and change over time. At the same time, it seems appropriate to carry out further research into the factors that lead to the establishment of cross-border relationships (prerequisites for cooperation). It is also crucial to investigate the premises related to the stability of organisations and their cross-border partnerships, particularly those related to the issue of trust and low barriers to exit that pose a threat to group cohesion (Gaudeul et al., 2017) or cultural differences.

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