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Cross-border Cooperation in Central Europe: A Comparison of Culture and Policy Effectiveness in the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak Border Regions

KATJA SARMIENTO-MIRWALDT &
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Abstract

Cross-border cooperation is recognised as an important aspect of regional development and especially EU cohesion policy. Policy effectiveness depends on how well programmes are suited to different border regional contexts. This essay analyses the factors that shape cooperation by comparing the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak border regions. Particular emphasis is placed on the cultural factors that set these two regions apart. The essay reveals that close-knit networks across the Polish–Slovak border promote successful policy definition and implementation. At the same time, the absence of such networks across the Polish–German border has led to a high degree of policy innovation.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IS WIDELY RECOGNISED AS PLAYING an important role in regional development concepts. Cooperation is useful in coordinating policy and jointly exploiting common development potentials. Some border regions are seen as handicapped by their peripheral location and because national borders tend to hinder flows of trade, information and people (Anderson *et al.* 2003; Bufon 2003). In such a context, competent cross-border cooperation can help to create synergies, provide networking opportunities and give development impulses. It is for these reasons that cooperation is increasingly important in EU cohesion policy (Mirwaldt *et al.* 2009). Since the start of the 2007–2013 funding period, cross-border cooperation has been funded by the EU as one of the fundamental objectives of cohesion policy, European Territorial Cooperation. Because territorial cooperation, and especially cross-border cooperation, is likely to play an increasingly important role in the future, it is worthwhile to examine the determinants of effective cooperation.

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Cross-border cooperation is conditioned by the distinctive context in different border regions. European borders differ considerably in their physical, political and economic circumstances (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europäischer Grenzregionen 2008*). Comparisons between early West European cross-border initiatives and certain younger efforts in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), in particular, have shown that effective cooperation is often more difficult to achieve in CEE (*Kepka & Murphy 2002; Yoder 2003*). This is because conditions such as cross-border linkages or funds tend to be less favourable here than in many Western European programmes. For cooperation to have a positive effect, it must be tailored to build on regional strengths while simultaneously addressing local problems.

Previous studies have identified a range of background conditions that shape cooperation in specific regions. However, these studies have relied almost entirely on in-depth case study research that does not permit generalisation. Systematic comparative analysis to determine what factors promote policy effectiveness has so far been conspicuously absent. This essay suggests that comparing carefully selected cases can help to determine the impact on the ground of different contextual factors. The essay compares cooperation experiences in the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak border regions. These two regions face similar political, economic and legal problems. However, in terms of cultural interlinkages across the border, the Polish–Slovak border benefits from a much more favourable context than the Polish–German border region. Thus, comparing these two cases makes it possible to identify the impact of different cultural and social backgrounds on the effectiveness of cooperation.

The analysis relies on documentary evidence such as the programmes themselves, implementation documents and annual reports from the two regions. In order to interpret this basic information, the analysis also relies on 36 semi-structured interviews with policymakers that were conducted between March 2009 and September 2011. The next section, which traces the development of cross-border cooperation in Europe, is followed by a review of previous enquiries into contextual factors. The fourth section of this essay compares the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak cross-border programmes in the 2000–2006 and 2007–2013 funding periods with regard to three indicators of policy effectiveness: policy definition, policy implementation and policy innovation. The comparative conclusions reveal that close cultural links facilitate policy definition and, above all, implementation in the Polish–Slovak border region but that the absence of such links in the Polish–German border region has inspired policymakers in the area of policy innovation.

Cross-border cooperation in the European context

Cross-border cooperation is defined as institutionalised collaboration between sub-national authorities such as regions or municipalities that adjoin each other across international borders. There are many different forms of cooperation across borders, but EU-funded cross-border cooperation is particularly intensive and has become prevalent since 1990.

Cross-border cooperation began in the 1950s and 1960s in West European regions such as the Dutch–German borderlands, the Upper Rhine valley and the Lake Constance region (*Scott 1996; Blatter 2004*). The Dutch–German ‘Euregio’, where sub-national authorities agreed to mutually beneficial cooperation across the border, was launched in 1958 as the first initiative of this sort. There was a perception that the borderlands suffered from their peripheral position—both geographically and politically—in the Netherlands and Germany. Cooperation was seen as a means of addressing these negative effects. In institutionalising

cooperation, Dutch and German border municipalities first engaged in relationship-building across the border and then lobbied jointly for concrete goals such as improvements in cross-border infrastructure. The Euregio has subsequently been described as a model for cross-border cooperation because several similar associations followed suit in the 1970s (Scott 1996; Perkmann 2003).

In the 1980s and 1990s, European institutions began to provide legal and financial support for cross-border cooperation (Perkmann 1999). First, a number of multilateral agreements were concluded through the Council of Europe, such as the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation that was signed in 1980 and that committed the member states to facilitating and fostering cross-border cooperation. Second, the EU started supporting cross-border cooperation financially in 1990, when the Community Initiative INTERREG was first introduced as the main funding instrument for territorial cooperation (Ferry & Gross 2005).

Following the introduction of legal and financial support instruments, cross-border initiatives mushroomed all over Western Europe. According to one estimate, there were 15 cross-border regions by the end of the 1970s, 30 by the end of the 1980s and 73 by the end of the 1990s (Perkmann 2003). Today, there is hardly any European border that is not covered by a cross-border agreement. Cross-border cooperation takes place on the territory of so-called 'Euroregions', voluntary associations of municipalities that lie adjacent to state borders. Examples include the original Dutch–German Euregio, but also the Transmanche region that stretches across the English Channel and the Pyrenees–Mediterranean Euroregion between French and Spanish regional authorities.

Partly due to the proliferation of cross-border initiatives, INTERREG has become ever more important since its introduction in 1990, both in terms of the funds attached and in terms of its thematic orientation that was extended over time to cover diverse forms of territorial cooperation. Cooperation also acquired a high profile in EU cohesion policy. Thus, since the adoption in 1999 of the European Spatial Development Perspective, an attempt to harmonise spatial planning at the European level, and with the gradual embracing of the 'territorial cohesion' objective in the 2000s, cross-border cooperation has been seen as a good way of promoting more even spatial development (Mirwaldt *et al.* 2009). With the start of the 2007–2013 funding period, territorial cooperation was upgraded further, as INTERREG became the third core objective of EU cohesion policy (Objective 3), after convergence and competitiveness and employment. In the same period, the budget for the implementation of all 52 cross-border programmes was €5.6 billion from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the main financial instrument of EU cohesion policy.

In Objective 3 programmes, just as in INTERREG previously, a formal agreement between regional authorities is followed by the definition of multi-annual programmes that lay down the medium-term priorities of a particular cross-border region. These programmes are implemented through projects in such areas as planning, tourism or services infrastructure. Like all Structural Funds programmes, they are notoriously difficult to implement because institutional structures are complex and because the European Commission has established strict regulations for managing and implementing its funds (Bachtler *et al.* 2005). For example, while a managing authority has overall responsibility, it is a monitoring committee that possesses substantive managerial and supervisory competences. Various other committees, authorities and working groups are responsible for processing applications and for ensuring compliance with the EU's demanding financial rules.

While the first cross-border ventures were bottom-up initiatives that arose out of local needs, the creation of a European opportunity structure was crucial in bringing about the proliferation of cooperation initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s (Church & Reid 1999; Perkmann 1999, 2002, 2003). The influence of European support in stimulating new cross-border ventures is particularly apparent in CEE.

Until 1989 the communist states were cut off by the Iron Curtain and there was very little cross-border cooperation within the communist bloc and certainly no intensive, multi-dimensional cooperation of the sort described above in certain Western European regions (Kepka & Murphy 2002; Halás 2007). After the end of the Cold War, with preparations underway to extend the European integration process eastward, Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia almost immediately instigated cooperation with Western Europe and subsequently with each other. The trilateral Euroregion Neisse–Nisa–Nysa between Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia (the Czech Republic after 1993) was founded in 1991 as the first such venture. Others soon followed.

Many CEE cross-border initiatives suffered from historical disadvantages that made it difficult to apply the Western model. Thus, there was only a weak regional tradition in CEE states (Batt & Wolczuk 2002; Kepka & Murphy 2002), and local and especially regional authorities either did not exist or lacked the powers to conclude and implement cross-border agreements. National administrations commonly sought to control cross-border ventures, often because they viewed regional autonomy as a challenge to the integrity of the state (Keating & Hughes 2003). Slovakia's Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, for example, attempted to centralise power and obstructed cross-border cooperation until the end of his period in power in 1998. Mečiar may have been an extreme example, but scepticism about sub-national empowerment and cross-border cooperation could also be detected in other CEE states including the Czech Republic (Bazin 2003). As a result of the top-down nature of cross-border cooperation in CEE, this cooperation was sometimes accused of being insensitive to local peculiarities (Popescu 2006).

Borders were much more restrictive or 'harsh' in CEE than anywhere in Western Europe. For example, in the communist bloc they had been largely closed to citizen traffic (Batt & Wolczuk 2002; Kepka & Murphy 2002). Moreover, many of these borders were historically associated with deep-seated conflict. For example, the Hungarian–Romanian border was associated with territorial losses after the world wars, the Czechoslovak–German border was associated with forced population transfers, and Poland's border with the Soviet Union was associated with both. As a result, cross-border flows were extremely limited after 1989, and CEE had no tradition of cross-border interaction comparable to most border regions in Western Europe (Yoder 2003).

How does the CEE context affect the governance of cross-border cooperation and, by implication, the success of the programmes? In order to answer this question, the next section considers a number of crucial background conditions, introduces the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak case studies, and develops three criteria to evaluate cooperation.

Explaining the governance of cross-border cooperation

Conditions on the ground have a decisive influence over the effectiveness of cooperation. Informed by policymakers' assessments, previous analyses have identified a range of crucial background conditions. These overlap and cannot always be told apart easily but, broadly

speaking, there are five types of factors: regional and local self-government; legal background; socio-economic factors; funding; and culture.

First, it has been shown that strong local authorities are better able to ensure successful territorial cooperation than weak ones (Bachtler *et al.* 2005, p. 135). In cooperation between regions of different states, problems often result from differences in administrative structures and sub-national competences that hinder formal institution building or coordination (Assembly of European Regions 1992).

Second, cross-border cooperation typically takes place on an uncertain or vaguely defined legal basis. As most cooperation initiatives have no legal personality and no public law status, they sometimes lack the legal basis to implement decisions (Assembly of European Regions 1992). New legal instruments, such as the European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) that was introduced in 2007, are not yet used widely.

Third, socio-economic factors include the level of development, welfare gaps that coincide with a border, as well as weakly developed cross-border infrastructure. Development gaps can make programmes more dynamic (Bachtler *et al.* 2005) but they can also give rise to competition and mutual suspicions. An absence of links between socio-economic actors, as well as compartmentalised markets, tends to inhibit cooperation (Krätke 1999).

Fourth, insufficient financial resources pose a major obstacle to territorial cooperation. There are often no genuinely common funds, making it difficult and time-consuming to take budgetary decisions (Assembly of European Regions 1992). EU-funded territorial cooperation suffers from the bureaucratic effort involved in implementing these programmes (Bachtler *et al.* 2005).

Fifth, culture refers on the one hand to a region's cross-border networks, a sense of regional identity or widespread language skills, all factors that facilitate day-to-day transactions, and on the other hand to administrative culture, as cooperation is more likely to be successful between partners that share similar organisational and management styles (Ratti 1993; Hofstede 2001).

While previous studies have been able to identify influential factors, most have so far largely ignored the tools of social science to determine how these factors influence cooperation on the ground. To this end, comparative analysis is necessary. It is sometimes argued that different countries' idiosyncrasies come together and interact to produce a complex combination of explanatory factors, making inference difficult (Przeworski & Teune 1970; Macintyre 1971). However, a thorough review of existing research and corresponding case selection make it possible to identify the impact on the ground of diverging independent variables, even if it may not fully explain all aspects of cross-border cooperation.

Comparison of a few cases permits the combination of the rigour of comparative enquiry with the thoroughness of in-depth analysis. There are two main ways of comparing few cases. In so-called most-similar systems designs, very similar cases that differ in terms of outcome are contrasted, so as to identify the influence of the divergent independent variables. Conversely, most-different systems designs compare different cases with a similar outcome, pinpointing the influence of the common features (Landman 2003). This essay employs a most-similar design in comparing the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak border regions. As Table 1 shows, these two borders face similar political, economic and legal problems. However, in terms of cultural interlinkages across the border, the

TABLE 1
CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN THE POLISH–GERMAN AND POLISH–SLOVAK BORDER REGIONS

	<i>Polish–German border</i>	<i>Polish–Slovak border</i>
<i>Regionalisation</i>	Dissimilar competences: German <i>Länder</i> are somewhat more powerful than Polish <i>województwa</i> . Cross-border cooperation is more centralised on the Polish side, whereas it is a <i>Land</i> competence in Germany. Local authorities are strong in both countries	Dissimilar competences: Polish <i>województwa</i> have more competences than Slovak <i>kraje</i> . Cross-border cooperation is more centralised in Slovakia, where financial audits are carried out in Bratislava. Polish local authorities have more authority than Slovak <i>obce</i>
<i>Laws</i>	Unclear legal basis of the cross-border programmes until the creation of new EGTC. Neisse–Nysa–Nisa EGTC is under preparation. Eurodistrict Oderland Nad Odrze EGTC between Brandenburg and Poland is under preparation	Unclear legal basis of the cross-border cooperation programme. Tritia EGTC prepared in the summer of 2010. Agreement between Slovakia's Žilina region, the Czech Moravia–Silesia region and Poland's Silesia and Opole provinces
<i>Economics</i>	Welfare gap: Germany's eastern <i>Länder</i> are wealthier than Poland's western <i>województwa</i> . However, the development prospects are better on the Polish side, while much of East Germany has been in socio-economic and demographic decline since the 1990s. Cross-border infrastructure is deficient	Welfare gap: Slovak border regions are developing more dynamically than the Polish border regions. The two sides are underdeveloped in national comparison. Both compete in the area of tourism. Transport infrastructure is better developed on the Polish side, though in need of modernisation
<i>Funding</i>	Three Objective 3 programmes totalling an ERDF budget of about €343,000,000 for 2007–2013. No genuinely common funds but regulations ensure that projects have a genuine cross-border effect	One Objective 3 programme with an ERDF budget of about €148,000,000 for 2007–2013. Insufficient funding tends to be a problem. No genuinely common fund but regulations ensure that projects have a genuine cross-border effect
<i>Culture</i>	Very different: prejudices, distrust and stereotypes among border region residents. Lacking language competences, especially in Germany. Divergent administrative cultures, but cordial personal relations are developing among policymakers	Quite similar: the Slovak and Polish sides of the border share a similar language, history and folk culture. Stable contacts between local authorities pre-date the programme, usually school exchanges or small cultural events

Polish–Slovak border region benefits from a much more favourable context than the Polish–German border region.

Table 1 shows that the two border regions resemble each other in many respects. As in many CEE border regions, the environment is less than favourable. First, sub-national competences are mismatched at both borders insofar as German *Länder* have more competences than Polish *województwa*, while Slovak *kraje* are still less influential. In terms of the legal basis, a number of EGTCs are in the process of being established at both borders. Until they are finalised, the uncertain legal footing represents a problem. Third, both regions are characterised by a relatively low level of development in comparison to the national average, including also infrastructure development. There are also considerable socio-economic disparities at both borders. Finally, since 2007, both regions have benefited from funding through Objective 3 (European Territorial Cooperation) of the ERDF.

In terms of cross-border culture, however, the Polish–German and Slovak–German border regions could not be more different. In the Polish–German border region, whatever cross-border networks had existed prior to World War II were destroyed as a result of the war, boundary shifts and population transfers (Urban 2004). The border was closed to citizen exchanges for most of the communist period. Thus, when the border was opened in 1991, Polish and German citizens were almost completely estranged (Matthiesen & Bürkner 2001; Rada 2004). In contrast, cross-border networks largely survived the communist period in the Polish–Slovak border region, even though cross-border contact and cooperation were limited during this period. The border was gradually opened after 1989, and the two sides were able to benefit from linguistic, cultural and social similarities (Halás 2007).

In short, Table 1 shows that both regions grapple with several fairly difficult background conditions; however, most of these resemble each other in both regions. Only in terms of culture is there a major difference between the unpromising environment of the Polish–German border region and the dense interconnections across the Polish–Slovak border. This suggests that the two border regions are suitable cases for comparative analysis of a ‘most-similar’ type (King *et al.* 1994; Landman 2003).

The question remains of how to operationalise the rather abstract dependent variable *effectiveness of cooperation*. On the one hand, past evaluations have used procedural indicators such as data on financial and physical progress, though these need to be complemented by rich information in order to make sense of the raw numbers (Bachtler *et al.* 2005). There is some merit in using these indicators: they are readily available and easy to compare across different contexts. Moreover, slow progress is usually indicative of deep-seated problems in a programme. On the other hand, these measures say very little about the governance of EU funds or about how well cooperation is suited to the local context. Another measure is needed to take account of this factor. In what follows, it is suggested that cooperation experiences can be conceptualised along different dimensions and that these dimensions can be used to assess the governance of cooperation. Here, the focus is on three key aspects, namely policy definition, policy implementation and policy innovation.

The first dimension is the policy definition stage. For territorial cooperation programmes, this refers to the steps after programmes are approved by the European Commission. After approval, details such as the type and amount of available support, eligibility and selection criteria as well as committees and other rules governing the allocation of funds must be defined. The question of how long it takes to agree these implementation procedures is important because it determines when the first projects can begin. For the 2000–2006 funding period, there was enormous variation across Europe. A two-year transition period, in which projects from the previous funding period are concluded and in which the parameters for the new period are established, is nothing unusual (Bachtler *et al.* 2005). Even so, in the 2007–2013 funding period, certain West European programmes, such as the Scottish–Irish cross-border programme or the Danish–German Syddanmark–Schleswig-KERN regions, were able to start funding projects as early as 2008. A programme start after 1 January 2009 signified a serious delay.

The second step is to review the implementation of the programmes. Reviewing financial and physical progress is generally accepted as a cornerstone of evaluating EU cohesion policy, including cross-border cooperation (Bachtler *et al.* 2005, p. 52). In other words, in the 2007–2013 period, what are the most up-to-date commitment and payment rates at the

time of writing? How many projects are already being implemented and how many have been closed? This is important as a general indicator of implementation progress. At the same time, delays in spending money can lead to automatic loss of funds. According to the EU's ' $n + 2/n + 3$ rule', funds are automatically lost if they are not spent within two or three years of being committed. New member states, as well as Greece and Portugal, have three years to make payments (' $n + 3$ '), while West European member states mostly comply with the ' $n + 2$ rule'. Thus, swift progress in committing and paying out funds is crucial, and delays are usually a symptom of deep-seated problems associated with the programme. Analysing progress by type of priority is also helpful in gauging the substantive progress of the programme.

The final aspect of cooperation being considered here is policy innovation. Cross-border cooperation is not normally evaluated according to how well it copes with a given context, and conventional measures of policy effectiveness do not capture this aspect. Nevertheless, it is one of the central claims of this essay that adaptation to the local environment is a precondition of successful cross-border cooperation. Because varying backgrounds condition different programmes, it is important to address local weaknesses and to resolve swiftly any possible problems in the programme. In order to assess the effectiveness of cooperation, therefore, this essay considers the ways in which programmes were modified to address local problems.

In what follows, the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak cross-border cooperation programmes will be compared along these three dimensions. Particular attention will be paid to cultural factors that distinguish the two regions.

Comparing Polish–German and Polish–Slovak cross-border cooperation

Figure 1 and Table 2 display some basic information about the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak border regions. As Table 2 shows, the Polish–Slovak border is slightly longer than the Polish–German border. However, the two border regions have a comparable population of just over six million inhabitants.

There are four Euroregions with Polish–German participation that were created in the early 1990s: Neisse–Nisa–Nysa, Spree–Neisse/Nysa–Bóbr (SNB), Pro Europa Viadrina and Pomerania, with Swedish participation. The Polish–Slovak border region consists of three Euroregions that are slightly younger than those at the Polish–German border: the large Karpacki Euroregion, which also involves Hungarian, Romanian and Ukrainian participation, Euroregion Tatry and, between Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, Euroregion Beskidy.¹

The EU began funding Polish–German cross-border cooperation in 1994 through INTERREG IIA and PHARE CBC. Poland joined the EU in 2004 and thus became eligible for INTERREG, later Objective 3, funding. In the Polish–Slovak border region, PHARE CBC was introduced in 2000 to support such initiatives as infrastructure development, environmental protection or support for local entrepreneurship. The experience gained in this period contributed to the 2004–2006 INTERREG IIIA programme and the 2007–2013 Objective 3 programme.

¹Moreover, Slovak municipalities could only commit to full membership after 1998 when Mečiar's Prime Ministership, which was hostile to all sub-national activism, ended.



FIGURE 1. MAP OF THE POLISH–GERMAN AND POLISH–SLOVAK EUROREGIONS.

Source: Own development, using ArcMap.

Table 2 shows that there are three programmes in the Polish–German border region, corresponding to the three German *Länder* bordering Poland, while there is only one programme at the Polish–Slovak border, reflecting the more centralised character of Polish–Slovak cooperation. The available ERDF funds for Polish–Slovak cross-border

TABLE 2
KEY DATA ON THE POLISH–GERMAN AND POLISH–SLOVAK BORDER REGIONS

	<i>Polish–German border</i>	<i>Polish–Slovak border</i>
Population	6.17 million	6.01 million
Length of border	467 km	541 km
Euroregions (year founded)	Neisse–Nisa–Nysa (1991) Spree–Neisse/Nysa–Bóbr (1993) Pro Europa Viadrina (1993) Pomerania (1995)	Karpacki (1993) Tatry (1994) Beskidy (1999)
Objective 3 Operational Programmes	Mecklenburg–Vorpommern– Zachodniopomorskie Brandenburg–Lubuskie Saxony–Dolnośląskie	Poland–Slovak Republic
ERDF Funds 2007–2013 (€, without Technical Assistance)	342,928,640	147,963,297

cooperation are less than half of what the three Polish–German programmes have at their disposal. The implications of this will be analysed below.

Policy definition

The three Polish–German programmes started very late, in the course of 2009. New legal standards made it necessary to re-conceptualise the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern–Zachodniopomorskie programme, for example, and the ensuing preparation of key documents took so long that the first funding decisions could only be taken in the autumn of 2009. Similarly, the implementation document for the Polish–Saxon programme was adopted in April 2009, and the monitoring committee decided on the first project applications only in September of that year. The Brandenburg–Lubuskie programme began slightly earlier, in March 2009. Overall, therefore, all three programmes were seriously delayed.

Policymakers in the region were unanimous in condemning these delays. For example, one Euroregional representative marvelled: ‘Incredible, it’s already 2009. No projects were supported in 2007 and 2008. . . . Money was supposed to be available as early as 2007 but it is still not available’.² Another explained: ‘When we made the transition from PHARE CBC to INTERREG, there was a similar delay, until 2005. Now we have the same problem: it’s already 2009 but still nothing’.³

Germans and Poles offered different explanations for the delays: German policymakers criticised the high staff turnover in the Polish administration which impeded coordination on a personal basis and the development of trust. Conversely, Polish officials blamed their German counterparts for their inflexibility and lack of creativity. According to one interviewee, different administrative cultures had led to infighting over the ‘rules of the game’: ‘In the Dutch–German border region, where they had a seamless transition [between the programmes], cooperation is a matter of course. Here, we still don’t have a common administrative culture and common culture of communication.’⁴

In other words, policymakers claimed that cultural differences and dissimilar administrative cultures gave rise to internal disagreements that, in turn, led to delays in the programme start.

Conversely, work on the implementation document for the 2007–2013 Polish–Slovak cross-border cooperation programme began in December 2006, a year before the launch of the new programme. In the course of 2006, 13 meetings of the Working Group, responsible for drawing up the programme, were held. Even though the Working Group had prepared the key documents at the start of 2007, it took a whole year to distribute them among potential beneficiaries to enable them to apply for funding. Only thanks to the high interest among potential beneficiaries did the first call for projects start in August 2008. A first list of accepted projects was published by the Monitoring Committee in April 2009.

In other words, although project applications were accepted within the acceptable two-year window after the programme start, almost two years were lost in the allocation of funds. Regional and local policymakers responsible for the implementation of the programme blamed indolence and a lack of organisation in the managing institutions, notably the Polish

² Author’s interview with a policymaker, Frankfurt (Oder), 2 March 2009.

³ Author’s interview with a policymaker, Jelenia Góra, 1 April 2009.

⁴ Author’s interview with a policymaker, Dresden, 2 April 2009.

Ministry of Regional Development. Thus, a representative of the contact point at the Marshall's Office in Małopolska complained: 'All documents for applicants were prepared in 2007; I do not understand why it took them so long to print them out and distribute them among beneficiaries'.⁵ It has been suggested that, prior to 2004, cross-border cooperation was seen by the Ministry as an excellent source of funding. However, this became a much lower priority once Poland joined the EU and thus became eligible for the much more lucrative Structural Funds. This would explain why the Ministry did not make a stronger effort to get the new programme underway.⁶ Dissatisfaction with the Managing Authority was also pronounced on the Slovak side: 'Recruitment of new employees to the [Joint Technical Secretariat] in Kraków started only after the first project call in August 2008. Everything took longer than it should ... that is why there was a delay in assessing the projects'.⁷

The second reason identified by policymakers was the transition from INTERREG IIIA to European Territorial Cooperation. New rules adopted by the EU for the 2007–2013 period caused some confusion: 'I have been working on the Slovak–Polish border for almost ten years, and each programme is a bit different. On PHARE CBC, we have all been learning, then INTERREG came and now it is different again. Much more emphasis is now put on the trans-border effect. ...'⁸

Representatives of the Joint Technical Secretariat who are responsible for conducting project calls pointed to the extremely high level of interest in the programme among Slovak and Polish beneficiaries as a reason for the delay: 'Already in the first competition, €20 million have been available for allocation. The level of interest was overwhelming'.⁹ High demand may have caused some delays but it also permitted the Polish–Slovak programme to advance quicker than the Polish–German programme by 2009, as the next section will show.

Policy implementation

To give an overview of the 2000–2006 period, [Table 3](#) presents the programme results for the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern–Zachodniopomorskie programme, representative of the three Polish–German programmes.

The programme had seven priorities, but technical and tourist infrastructure development (Priority B: 144 projects) as well as culture and cooperation (Priority F: 107 projects) together made up over 75% of the programme. These two thematic priorities tended to have the most generous allocations in all three programmes; infrastructure because projects such as road or rail construction are extremely expensive, and culture because there is a lot of demand for projects in this area, even though these are often inexpensive (see the sub-section on the fund for microprojects). [Table 3](#) also shows that the final outcome of the programme was very similar to what was initially envisaged. Overall, €111,000,000 of ERDF money were spent on 430 projects. The Polish partners were only eligible for

⁵ Author's interview with a policymaker, Kraków, 1 June 2010.

⁶ The authors are grateful to Maciej Smełkowski for raising this point.

⁷ Author's interview with a policymaker, Žilina, 1 July 2010.

⁸ Author's interview with a policymaker, Bielsko–Biała, 2 June 2010.

⁹ Author's interview with a policymaker, Kraków, 2 June 2010.

TABLE 3
2000–2006 OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME MECKLENBURG–VORPOMMERN/
BRANDENBURG–ZACHODNIOPOMORSKIE

	<i>Initial ERDF budget (€)</i>	<i>ERDF money spent (€)</i>	<i>No. of projects</i>
Priority A—Economic development and cooperation	6,658,512	6,353,819	89
Priority B—Improving technical and tourist infrastructure	67,591,565	66,509,620	144
Priority C—Environment	6,978,988	6,842,924	40
Priority D—Rural development	6,108,023	6,092,843	21
Priority E—Qualification and measures to create jobs	4,738,379	4,578,639	23
Priority F—Inter-regional cooperation, investments in culture and encounters, small projects fund	18,568,272	18,329,007	107
Priority G—Special support for border areas in the accession states	2,610,440	2,610,440	6
Total	113,254,179	111,317,292	430

Note: Technical Assistance is excluded.

Source: Ministerium für Wirtschaft, Arbeit und Tourismus Mecklenburg–Vorpommern (n.d.) *Ergebnisse der grenzübergreifenden Zusammenarbeit im Regionalen Programm Mecklenburg–Vorpommern/Brandenburg–Polen (Wojewodschaft Zachodniopomorskie) im Zeitraum 2000–2006*, available at: <http://www.interreg4a.info/index.php?id=29&L = fyxomzehqhpckpda>, accessed 1 February 2011.

INTERREG money after Poland's EU accession in 2004 but, on average, these figures suggest that approximately 60 projects were carried out each year.

As Table 4 shows, during the three years of the Polish–Slovak INTERREG IIIA programme, 312 projects worth around €26,000,000 (around €20,000,000 from the ERDF

TABLE 4
2004–2006 OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME POLAND–SLOVAK REPUBLIC

	<i>ERDF contribution (€)</i>	<i>Total money spent (€)</i>	<i>No. of projects</i>
Priority 1: Infrastructure development	11,515,546	15,677,180	50
Measure 1.1: Technical and communication infrastructure	6,347,132	8,594,453	26
Measure 1.2: Infrastructure for environmental protection	5,168,414	7,082,728	24
Priority 2: Socio-economic development	7,775,725	10,501,449	262
Measure 2.1: Human resources development and promotion of entrepreneurship	2,065,907	2,760,344	31
Measure 2.2: Protection of natural and cultural heritage	3,728,687	5,082,767	42
Measure 2.3: Support for local initiatives (Micro-projects)	1,981,131	2,658,339	189
Total	19,291,271	26,178,629	312

Note: Technical Assistance is excluded.

Source: Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego (n.d.) *Współpraca polsko-słowacka. Przeszłość, Teraźniejszość, Przyszłość*, available at: http://pl.plsk.eu/files/?id_plik=2103, accessed 1 February 2011.

fund) were carried out, averaging over 100 projects a year. This means that all the money allocated for this programme was spent, making it one of the most successful programmes in CEE.

Table 4 also indicates that the programme was divided into two substantive priorities: infrastructural development and socio-economic development. These priorities were subdivided into seven measures. The most popular measures included human resources development and promotion of entrepreneurship, Measure 2.1 (31 projects) and the protection of the natural and cultural heritage, Measure 2.2 (42 projects), as well as Measure 2.3 which supported microprojects (189 projects). This means that the Polish–Slovak programme was somewhat more balanced than the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern–Zachodniopomorskie programme that focused heavily on infrastructure and cultural cooperation.

It emerged in the Polish–German border region in the 2000–2006 programming period that it is difficult to meet targets with many precisely defined funding categories. As a result, in the 2007–2013 period all three Polish–German programmes reduced their funding categories to two or three. These broader priorities cover a variety of themes. For example, the Polish–Saxon priority of cross-border development encompasses sub-priorities such as economics and science, tourism, traffic, environment as well as spatial and regional planning.

Table 5 illustrates progress in the 2007–2013 Saxony–Dolnośląskie programme. It shows that, by December 2010, only 11 projects had been accepted in Priority 1, equivalent to a 25% commitment rate. According to the 2010 annual report, this is partly because the programme overestimated the need for cross-border funds among local enterprises, who have access to several different sources of financial support (Sächsische Aufbaubank 2011). Demand for Priority 1 increased in 2010 compared to earlier years. Nonetheless, with 75% of the funds allocated to Priority 1 still available at the end of 2010, slow progress in this priority raised concerns, and the Monitoring Committee introduced the possibility of shifting funds from Priority 1 to Priority 2, if necessary (Sächsische Aufbaubank 2011). Conversely, with 35 projects in Priority 2, projects in the area of social integration were well underway. Most were in the sub-areas of education and culture. Examples include the establishment of a cultural centre or of a network between teachers from the region. The commitment rate in Priority 2 amounted to over 57%. By December 2010, the payment rate was 0.08% for Priority 1 and 5.2% for Priority 2, reflecting the differential progress in both priorities.

Slow progress is not surprising given the delayed start of all German–Polish programmes. However, there is some variation between programmes, as Table 6 indicates.

TABLE 5
2007–2013 OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME SAXONY–DOLNOŚLĄSKIE: BUDGET AND COMMITMENTS

	<i>ERDF budget (€)</i>	<i>Commitments (€)</i>	<i>Commitment rate %</i>	<i>No. of projects</i>
Priority axis 1—Cross-border development	49,754,945	12,478,491	25.1	11
Priority axis 2—Cross-border social integration	49,049,395	28,024,040	57.1	35
Total	98,804,340	40,502,531	41.0	46

Note: Technical Assistance is excluded.

Source: Sächsische Aufbaubank (2011).

TABLE 6
2007–2013 OPERATIONAL PROGRAMMES MECKLENBURG–VORPOMMERN–ZACHODNIOPOMORSKIE
AND BRANDENBURG–LUBUSKIE

	<i>MVP–Zachodniopomorskie</i>			<i>Brandenburg–Lubuskie</i>		
	<i>ERDF budget (€)</i>	<i>Commitment rate %</i>	<i>No. of projects</i>	<i>ERDF budget (€)</i>	<i>Commitment rate %</i>	<i>No. of projects</i>
Priority 1—Infrastructure for cross-border cooperation and environmental situation	55,381,094	60.7	14	71,739,587	59.7	29
Priority 2—Cross-border economic links and economy–sciences cooperation	29,951,364	49.97	7	12,150,033	37.0	8
Priority 3—Cross-border HR and cooperation in health, culture and education	39,511,452	74.6	18	35,390,770	47.3	11
Total	124,843,910	62.6	39	119,280,390	53.7	49

Note: Technical Assistance is excluded.

Sources: [Ministerium für Wirtschaft, Arbeit und Tourismus Mecklenburg–Vorpommern \(2011\)](#); [Land Brandenburg \(2007\)](#); [Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego \(2011a\)](#).

The table shows progress in the Brandenburg–Lubuskie and the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern–Zachodniopomorskie programmes that share the same priorities. As the table also indicates, progress has varied between priorities. With 49 projects, the Brandenburg–Lubuskie programme had achieved a 53% commitment rate and a 4.8% payment rate at the end of 2010. This was much higher in Priority 1, concerning infrastructure, than in Priority 2, which is designed to stimulate cross-border economic links and economy–sciences cooperation. Here, the commitment rate amounted to only 37%, something that the programme authorities blamed on a lack of potential beneficiaries in the region ([Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego 2011a](#)). In 2010, two projects were completed in Priority 1, namely the modernisation of a leisure and sports facility as well as the equipment of a Polish–German meeting centre.

In the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern–Zachodniopomorskie programme, which had committed more than 62% of the €125,000,000 of available ERDF money, 39 projects were accepted. This high overall percentage is due largely to the 74% commitment rate in the human resources and cooperation category. Slow progress in payments raised concern about the $n + 3$ rule: ways of preventing decommitment were debated in the Monitoring Committee for the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern–Zachodniopomorskie programme though, in the end, $n + 3$ targets could be reached at the end of 2010 ([Ministerium für Wirtschaft, Arbeit und Tourismus Mecklenburg–Vorpommern 2011](#)).

Table 7 illustrates progress in the Polish–Slovak cross-border cooperation programme 2007–2013 up until 31 December 2010. 91 projects within Priority axes 1 and 2 were accepted but one applicant dropped out before signing the financial agreement. By December 2010, 90 projects had been contracted for financial support, as well as 369 microprojects (234 in the first call and 135 in the second call) that are covered under one umbrella programme.

The first call was very successful and received overwhelming interest from potential beneficiaries. The value of applications amounted to €178,000,000, exceeding the total

TABLE 7
2007–2013 OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME POLAND–SLOVAK REPUBLIC: BUDGET, COMMITMENTS
AND NUMBER OF ACCEPTED PROJECTS ON 31 DECEMBER 2010

	<i>ERDF budget (€)</i>	<i>Commitments (€)</i>	<i>Commitment rate %</i>	<i>No. of projects</i>
Priority axis 1—Development of cross-border infrastructure	67,685,338	67,685,338	100.0	26
Priority axis 2—Socio-economic development	53,518,639	50,090,473	93.6	64
Priority axis 3—Supporting local initiatives (microprojects)	26,759,320	14,823,006	55.4	1 umbrella project (369 microprojects)
Total	147,963,297	132,598,817	89.6	91

Note: Technical Assistance is excluded.

Source: [Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego \(2011b\)](#).

ERDF budget of €157,000,000. Most applications were submitted in Priority axis 2 on social and economic development, notably in the sub-priorities of protecting the cultural and natural heritage, developing cross-border cooperation in tourism and networking. At the beginning of 2010 a second call was publicised, and 42 new projects worth over €53,000,000 were accepted. The second call met with great interest from applicants. This time, there were 203 applications and their value amounted to €254,000,000. Second time applicants had more time to acquaint themselves with the programme's rules, find a partner and prepare projects and the required documentation. Many projects submitted for the second call were projects which had been rejected during the first call due to technical shortcomings. Most applications were again submitted in Priority axis 2.

Costs in Priority axes 1 and 2 after two calls amounted to more than €117,000,000 from the ERDF, equalling 97% of available funds for the first and second priorities of the entire programme. By December 2010, €132,000,000 had been assigned to projects, equalling more than 89% of the total ERDF budget for the programme, and far more than in the Polish–German programmes.

The high commitment rate is due to the very high interest among potential beneficiaries in the Polish–Slovak programme as well as enduring basic infrastructural and development needs in the region. However, it is likely that cultural similarities constitute one of the most important reasons for the success of the programme. Communication between partners from both sides of the border is easy because, unlike in the Polish–German border region, there is no major language barrier. Information exchange is straightforward as a result. In informal settings such as joint training, professional interpreters are not needed. Moreover, previous experiences such as local festivals or school exchanges helped to establish linkages between local authorities, rendering them more likely to cooperate formally and jointly apply for EU funds.¹⁰

Apart from payments towards Priority axis 4 of the Polish–Slovak programme (technical assistance, which is not a substantive priority and thus not shown in [Table 6](#)), there had been

¹⁰Around 80% of projects are conducted by partners who already cooperated with each other either in INTERREG projects or earlier during spontaneous events (author's interview with a policymaker, Kraków, 2 July 2010; interview with beneficiaries in Žilina, 1 September 2011).

137 payments amounting to €13,500,000 by December 2010. This represents a 9% payment rate, far higher than in any of the Polish–German programmes ([Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego 2011b](#)).

Policy innovation

In the Polish–German border region, a special challenge at the outset was that the border region differs in cultural and historical terms from many West European border regions. The citizens who live in those border regions have, over time, developed dense cross-border networks. A multitude of exchanges take place across these borders every day, facilitated by widespread language skills ([Eder & Sandtner 2002](#); [Kepka & Murphy 2002](#); [Strüver 2005](#)). Conversely, few linkages across the Polish–German border survived World War II and the Cold War. In the early 1990s, there were no shared cultural traditions, no widespread language skills and only extremely limited cross-border social networks ([Jajeśniak-Quast & Stokłosa 2000](#)). In many cases, citizens showed outright hostility: on the day the visa agreement came into force, the first Polish coaches arriving in Frankfurt on Oder were greeted by stone-throwing neo-Nazis ([Rada 2004](#)).

This lack of cross-border networks is important, not only as a shortcoming in its own right but also because it tends to undermine regional cross-border development concepts ([Krätke 1999](#); [Guz-Vetter 2002](#)). Thus, in the early 1990s, policymakers realised the need to bring people from both sides of the border together in informal settings. This would enable them to get to know each other, and the hope was that such encounters would counter negative stereotypes and contribute towards trust-building in the border region. However, at the time there were no funds for the type of settings policymakers had in mind, including sporting events, exhibitions or local fairs. The PHARE CBC regulations on the Polish side above all were a hindrance because projects had to be worth at least €2,000,000, far too much for the purposes of small-scale encounters.

As a result, a so-called fund for microprojects was set up in 1995. Funds of around €2,000,000 were reserved for microprojects on both sides of the border ([Jałowiecki & Smętkowski 2004](#)). The implementation was simplified in comparison to regular projects and left to the Polish–German Euroregions ([Mirwaldt 2012](#)). Although it is too early to tell whether microprojects can bring about a sense of mutual trust among Poles and Germans in the border region, the fund is deemed to be a great success. In the 2000–2006 funding period, for example, over 2,700 microprojects were carried out in the Polish–German border region, bringing together thousands of Poles and Germans. Examples included a Polish–German children’s party in Euroregion Pro Europa Viadrina or a photo exhibition on Euroregion Neisse–Nisa–Nysa. There is a general consensus that such encounters have a positive effect. As one policymaker put it:

Such organised encounters in a majority of cases really trigger further encounters, where people [from different sides of the border] meet at a fair, connect, decide to hold their own fair, get together in the meantime. . . . And the effect is long-term because one meeting leads to another.¹¹

¹¹ Author’s interview with a policymaker, Gorzów Wielkopolski, 4 May 2009.

So popular is the idea of a microprojects facility that the European Commission now recommends the setting-up of such a facility in its guidance documents. Nearly all CEE cross-border programmes feature a fund for microprojects, even where cultural cross-border connections between citizens and administrations are already strong, as in the Polish–Slovak border region. In other words, one of the major problems holding back the Polish–German border region—its lack of socio-cultural linkages across the border—also brought about major policy innovation.

Few innovations were introduced to the 2000–2006 and 2007–2013 Polish–Slovak programmes. Unlike the Polish–German border region, where a lack of linkages across the border initially defined most other cross-border ventures, the Polish–Slovak border region had to grapple with several minor hurdles, and the only major problem resulted from insufficient available funds. As a result, no major innovation comparable to the Polish–German invention of the fund for microprojects was introduced.

However, certain rules and conventions have been adapted slightly to local needs. First, experiences from the implementation of INTERREG IIIA at the Polish–Slovak border indicated that more emphasis should be placed on the training of future beneficiaries. Most applicants had already been beneficiaries in the earlier INTERREG IIIA programme, and some projects in the 2007–2013 period were a continuation of previous successful INTERREG projects. However, under PHARE CBC and only three years of INTERREG, beneficiaries had few opportunities to learn how to put together high quality applications. In particular, they had trouble defining the trans-border effect of their project correctly, a crucial condition for projects to be funded. In order to respond to this problem, special emphasis was placed on training the applicants during the 2007–2013 programme. Training was offered by the Joint Technical Secretariat in Cracow and by regional authorities on both sides of the border, particularly before new calls were publicised and in specially organised conferences. Additionally, there are Regional Contact Points in each region which support future applicants.

A second decision that shaped implementation procedures was to limit the eligible territory under INTERREG IIIA. Earlier, it had been possible to submit, for example, applications for infrastructural projects that would be located quite far from the border. In actual fact, though, these projects had no realistic chance of being funded because their distance from the border made it impossible to argue that these projects would have a genuine trans-border effect. Thus, with the start of the INTERREG IIIA programme, the eligible territory was limited to certain areas closely adjoining the Polish–Slovak border, on the Polish side the Bielski, Nowosądecki and Krośnieńsko-Przemyski sub-regions (*podregiony*) and on the Slovak side the Žilina and Prešov regions (*kraje*). Policymakers claimed that excluding projects which had no chance of being selected saved time during the assessment of applications.

Finally, in 2010 and following proposals from beneficiaries, a new procedure to implement changes within projects was approved. This introduced a fast information system to systematise and speed up the process of altering project partners during their realisation. Additionally, the process of reimbursement underwent a reform, where patterns of financial reports were simplified ([Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego 2011b](#)).

In sum, the Polish–Slovak programme was able to build on its regional strengths, notably the close cultural connections across the border. Policymakers were also able to deal with certain problems connected specifically with the programme. However, the region has not

witnessed any momentous policy innovations, and one of the main problems in the Polish–Slovak programme—the insufficient amount of funding—remains unsolved.

Conclusions

The main aim of this essay was to analyse the effect of different contextual factors on the governance of cross-border cooperation. This was done here through comparison of the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak cross-border cooperation programmes in the 2000–2006 and 2007–2013 programmes. These two regions are very different in terms of the cultural connections that span the border, and comparison made it possible to identify the effect of this difference on three aspects of policy effectiveness: definition, implementation and innovation.

In terms of policy definition, the Polish–German and Polish–Slovak programmes were delayed far beyond the 2007 start date. Only in early 2009 did the first projects begin in the Polish–Slovak and in the Brandenburg–Lubuskie programmes. In the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern–Zachodniopomorskie and Saxony–Dolnośląskie programmes, it took until autumn 2009 for the first projects to be accepted. Policymakers presented various reasons for the delays. In the Polish–Slovak case, preparations began with plenty of time to spare. The programme could have started much earlier but for the delay in sending the relevant documentation out to beneficiaries. High demand among potential beneficiaries was another reason for the delay in the Polish–Slovak programme: the competent authorities were so overwhelmed by the interest from applicants that they took longer than usual to make project decisions. Usually, though, high demand on the part of potential beneficiaries is seen as a very good sign. At the Polish–German border, delays were blamed on a lack of successful communication and divergent administrative cultures between authorities on both sides of the border.

As for policy implementation, progress has been variable in the three Polish–German programmes. With 46 projects and a 41% commitment rate, the Saxony–Dolnośląskie has been the slowest to develop. Here, the late start no doubt had a negative impact on progress. Conversely, the Brandenburg–Lubuskie and Mecklenburg–Vorpommern–Zachodniopomorskie programmes were broadly up to date by the end of 2010 and boasted overall commitment rates of 53% and 62%, respectively. However, demand has been highly uneven between different priorities. In the Saxony–Dolnośląskie and Mecklenburg–Vorpommern–Zachodniopomorskie programmes, for example, progress was much better in the area of culture than in the areas of infrastructure or development, and policymakers had to take special measures to stimulate demand in the neglected priorities.

In contrast, progress has been swift in the Polish–Slovak border region. After just two years of accepting project applications, the programme had already achieved an overall commitment rate of 89%. One reason was the exceptionally high demand, as applicants submitted many very good project applications. Long-standing cross-border networks, easy communication and cultural connections between potential beneficiaries on both sides go a long way in explaining the high number of sound applications. Moreover, with its low level of development, lack of cross-border infrastructure and high demand for social initiatives, the border region's needs are immense. As a result, it is hardly surprising that available funds are exhausted quickly. At the same time, it is necessary to point out that the swift progress in the Polish–Slovak programme is due partly to the significantly smaller budget

involved compared with the Polish–German border region. Local authorities have been very vocal in criticising this lack of funds.

Thus, the Polish–Slovak programme has so far been more successful in terms of policy definition and implementation than the Polish–German programmes. As regards policy innovation, however, the roles are reversed. It was at the Polish–German border that a major policy innovation in European cross-border cooperation was conceived. The lack of historical cross-border networks and a common culture of communication that has held the region back in other regards inspired local policymakers to create the fund for microprojects. Conversely, the rather more favourable cultural background in the Polish–Slovak border region has not made any major innovations necessary. Few innovations were introduced to the 2000–2006 and 2007–2013 programmes. Policy innovation has been more incremental than in the Polish–German border region and has involved some minor adjustments in the areas of training, area delineation and project administration. In other words, in this one sense at least, it seems as though a difficult background can sometimes also inspire policymakers to find genuine solutions to local problems.

The analysis has confirmed that it is not enough simply to list the background conditions that might have a positive or negative impact on cross-border governance. Rather, comparison of different programmes is crucial in determining exactly what impact these different conditions have on the way cooperation functions on the ground. This essay has done this for culture as a contextual factor, and it has shown that different cross-border cultures have a very important impact on different aspects of policy. For policymakers, the important lesson is that even the most daunting regional weaknesses can be turned into strengths and give innovative impulses to otherwise struggling programmes.

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