

Recent dynamics in European cross-border cooperation: towards a new period?

Regional Studies Association Annual International Conference 2010

Antoni Durà-Guimerà

Departament de Geografia. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Spain

antoni.dura@uab.cat

Xavier Oliveras González

Departament de Geografia. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Spain

xavier.oliveras@uab.cat

1. Introduction

Cross-border cooperation in Europe is a phenomenon that has generated a growing interest over the last 40 years in different fields (geography, international relations, law, political science...). This growing interest is parallel to the increasing implementation of cross-border cooperation initiatives: since 1958, with the foundation of the first euroregion (EUREGIO, in the Dutch-German border), over 130 euroregions have been formed until 2007 along European interstate borders (Oliveras, Durà & Perkmann, 2010). Up to late 2009 this number has grown to almost 140. However, the interest in cooperation has not resulted in a global and synthetic analysis of that phenomenon. Some notable exceptions exist, such as the works of Perkmann (2003). The bulk of research has focused on the description of individual initiatives or cross-border regions.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the development of that global and synthetic analysis. The evolution and development of territorial cooperation at sub-state level (mainly cross-border cooperation, together with interregional and transnational) will be showed. We can identify three historical periods in Europe since the 1950s, by analyzing the growth of cross-border initiatives, the territorial expansion and the development of instruments of institutional support to cooperation. Our hypothesis is that the most recent dynamics (2005 onwards) indicates the possible development of a new period. In this sense, the main objective of the paper is to highlight and evaluate the recent changes in the evolution of cross-border cooperation in Europe and to determine the emergence or not of that fourth period.

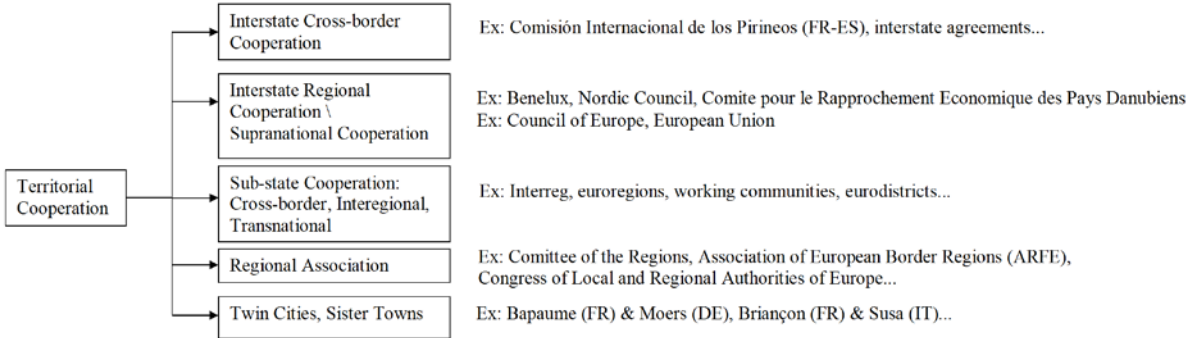
2. A context for cross-border cooperation in Europe (1958-2006)

Cross-border cooperation is part of a broader process of territorial cooperation (Figure 1). This process appeared in Europe during the 20th century, particularly after the Second World

War (1939-1945), although there are some remarkable experiences during the Interwar period (1918-1939). The process is not exclusive for Europe: several phenomena grouped under the label of territorial cooperation, to a greater or lesser extent, have been developed worldwide. Despite the differences between the various phenomena that compose territorial cooperation, all have in common the following: it is a *(more or less institutionalized) collaboration between territorial authorities from different states* and it is *aimed to coordinate and elaborate common policies and actions*. In this regard territorial cooperation is based on and represents the explicit will to overcome national boundaries and states, and also goes beyond the restrictive economic cooperation field.

This basic fact needs some qualification. The major differences are based on how and where cooperation is carried out. The various phenomena that we refer to are linked to different scales and levels of government and territorial actors. At the same time, some phenomena are transversal to other broader processes, such as paradiplomacy or international relations. We can mention other examples that are contemporary to the development of cross-border cooperation in Europe. Interstate cooperation initiatives have led to the foundation of the Council of Europe (1949) and the European Union (1957, then the European Economic Community), among others. At local scale twin cities and sister towns have appeared in a great number (more than 17.000 up to 2006). In addition, at regional and local level some regional associations have been created (Council of European Municipalities and Regions, CEMR, 1951; Association of European Border Regions, AEBR, 1971; Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe, CPMR, 1973).

Fig. 1: Territorial cooperation



Source: Own elaboration

Based on the common features, cross-border cooperation involves the following: the collaboration of sub-state authorities (from regions to local councils), without excluding the participation of other territorial actors (chambers of commerce, universities...), and often it is aimed at solving the dysfunctions caused by borders (political and administrative, cultural,

economic... differences). Often other forms of sub-state cooperation –such as interregional and transnational cooperation- are added to cross-border cooperation, although they are not directly involved to solve the border effect.

Historically, the first worldwide cross-border cooperation initiatives were carried out in South America during the 1930s and 1940s. The first experiences in Europe appeared in the late 1950s, but are now the most important in presence and development. It has been also developed, with lower intensity, in North America, since 1970s and 1980s, and only in recent years it has begun to increase in Asia and Africa.

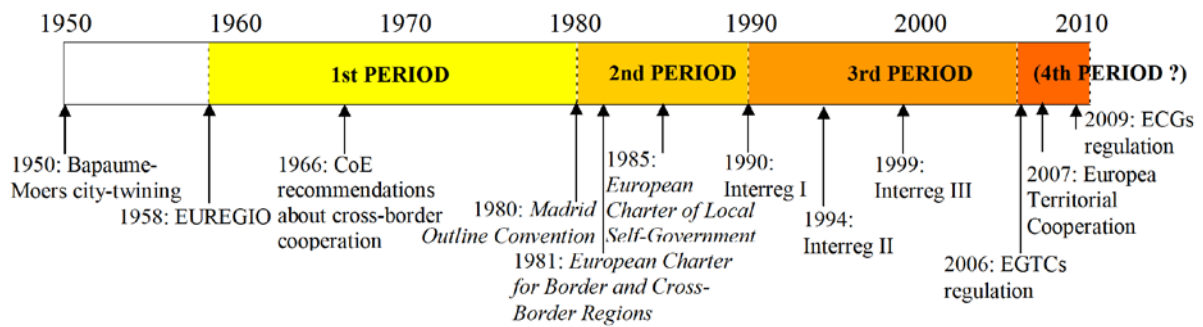
3. Cross-border cooperation in Europe (1958-2006): characteristics of historical evolution (three periods)

To study the evolution of cross-border cooperation in Europe we have analyzed three main variables (the number of cross-border initiatives, its spatial distribution and the instruments of institutional support). Cross-border cooperation is subject to various factors, of which some can be highlighted:

- Differences on both sides of international borders (differences in terms of power structures and levels of administration) may facilitate or hinder the necessary convergence for the development of cooperation initiatives.
- The political powers and financial autonomy granted to territorial authorities, as well as legal constraints imposed by state legislation (circumstance directly related to the previous factor) can determine the type of structure cooperation initiatives take, its content, objectives and subject matters, the actors' participation and decisions...
- The legal and financial support from state agencies (such as the Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière, MOT, in France) and supranational institutions, especially from European Union (EU), Council of Europe (CoE) or Nordic Council. On the contrary, the absence of any support or even the prohibition.

It is possible to identify three distinct periods by analysing the historical variation of these three variables and based on the influence of the mentioned factors (both in time and space). Schematically the periods are as follow: the first period, from 1950s until the late 70s; the second one, between late 70s and late 80s; and the third one, from late 80s until now. However the latter period maybe finishes at 2006 and a fourth period could begin. The following chronogram (Figure 2) shows the historical evolution, where some of the main events that mark and characterize the identified periods are indicated.

Fig. 2: The history of cross-border cooperation in Europe (1950-2010)



Source: Own elaboration

a) *The beginning of cross-border cooperation.* The first period (1950-1979) corresponds to the beginning of the experiences of cross-border cooperation, whose premises were established immediately at the end of World War II: the appearance of other phenomena of territorial cooperation. The premises were, on the one hand, the partnerships between towns belonging to European states that had been belligerent (especially between French and German towns) and, on the other, the informal contacts around common problems at local and regional level within the nascent Benelux (Schneider, 2006; Dominguez, 2008). In this period, cooperation initiatives were located almost exclusively at the borders between Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France and Switzerland, and Scandinavia. Those initiatives were based on more or less formal agreements, and they were often the result of the goodwill expressed by the actors and the possibilities offered by the legal system that they were subject to (Perkmann, 2003; AEBR, 2004). From the point of view of local and regional authorities, to undertake cooperation projects often meant entering in an area largely reserved to state authorities. In fact, until 1970s it was common the establishment of intergovernmental committees on issues related to borderlands, such as planning and transport infrastructure (Aykaç, 1994). Regional and local authorities were never invited to participate in such committees. In that direction there was a rejection and a lack of financial and technical support to cross-border cooperation, although there were some emerging exceptions, such as a recommendation from the Council of Europe in 1966 to support cooperation initiatives and similar ones from the Nordic Council.

b) *The first instruments of legal support.* The second period (1980-1989) is characterized by a growing supranational interest and support. In this regard it was established the first legal regulations on this matter: the *European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities* (or *Madrid Convention*) (1980) and the *European Charter of Local Self-Government* (1985), both upon Council of Europe. Neither of

the two set strict legal obligations, but are a statement of principles to promote and facilitate cooperation and represent the first step for establishing legal structures (CoE, 2006). Most European countries opted to establish bilateral treaties and agreements for the development and implementation of the *Madrid Convention* and *Charter*. That decision slowed their deployment, with considerable delays depending on every case. The *European Charter for Border and Cross-Border Regions* (1981), a set of recommendations by the AEBR, can be added to those documents. This instrument does not have any legal validity, but it is clearly aimed at influencing and adding pressure on the application of *Madrid Convention*. Apart from cross-border cooperation, the first transnational and interregional initiatives were consolidated, such as Working Communities promoted by the Council of Europe since the 70s. Finally, the territorial distribution of cooperation clearly shows its consolidation in Western Europe, especially around German borders, to the extent that Perkmann (2003) speaks of the “German factor”. At the same time, some initiatives began to develop in Southern and Eastern Europe, despite the existence of the Communist bloc.

c) *The financial support and a strong expansion of cross-border initiatives*. Since the late 1980s there was a considerable expansion in quantitative and qualitative terms. It was a result of the development of agreements and treaties subject to *Madrid Convention* (the *Agreement of Rome* between France and Italy, in 1993, the *Treaty of Bayonne* between France and Spain, in 1995, and others), of the signing of two additional protocols to *Madrid Convention* (1995 and 1998) and of the development of the European Union Regional Policy. Cross-border cooperation was stimulated by the determining involvement of the European Union, which created the “Community Initiatives” under the Structural Funds. Community Initiatives were a set of financial programs, of which the largest and most important was Interreg (created in 1990). Interreg developed three programs (1990-93, 1994-1999 and 2000-2006), each one with greater funding, eligible areas and territorial scope. Moreover, the EU had specific programs for border regions of non-EU states of the post-socialist Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean basin (Phare, Tacis, Cards and Meda). In the same direction the Council of Europe created a program in 1995 for the development of cross-border cooperation in Eastern Europe, although it had less funding than EU programs. In this context many euroregions and other similar organizations appeared in order to manage the projects financed by Interreg or the Council of Europe (Boira, 2004; CoE, 2006). Finally, cross-border cooperation initiatives were territorially consolidated in the rest of Europe, especially in Eastern Europe since mid 1990s. In this regard cross-border cooperation became a useful –and obligatory– mechanism to prepare countries for the accession to the European Union (AEBR, 1997). Unlike the

previous period, most of the growing number of experiences can be explained by the “Eastern Europe factor” (Oliveras, Durà & Perkmann, 2010).

4. 2006: Towards a new period?

Approximately since 2006 there was a turning point in the evolution of cross-border cooperation in Europe. The change is produced mainly in the field of institutional support (legal and financial), to which the adoption of an increasingly global and integrated perspective of the phenomenon and of the new territorial realities that cooperation creates must be added. Our hypothesis is that this change can be interpreted as the beginning of a new period, although in some aspects the dynamics remains the same as in previous years (third period).

The spatial distribution and the dominant type of cooperation still reflect the dynamics above. However a slowdown in the number of new initiatives developed, especially those that result in the creation of formal structures of cooperation with legal status, has to be indicated. This reduction in the growth rate is complemented with a slight spread towards territorial borders virtually unexisting until now.

Both the European Union and the Council of Europe promote and support the formation of more resolute cooperation initiatives with and between local and regional authorities from third countries, emphasizing from Middle East, Maghreb and the next states to become EU members (Triantaphyllides, 2005). This political will is translated, as in the previous period, in financial support by the EU, which has increased with the modification of previous programs (Tacis, Meda...) that have been replaced by new ones: Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) (for candidates and potential candidates for accession) and European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) (for states that have no prospect of accession). They cover the Balkans and Turkey, and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Basin, Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus, respectively. In the Mediterranean Basin (ie, in the context of Euro-Mediterranean) an incipient interest to develop cooperation projects between territorial authorities from Europe and North Africa is observed. Some recent initiatives in the fields of supranational and regional cooperation can be indicative of that: the foundation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2009, and the Euro-Mediterranean Assembly of Local and Regional Authorities (ARLEM) earlier this year 2010.

The territorial growth of cooperation initiatives shows again the “Eastern Europe factor”. In fact, the main growth is detected in this part of Europe, including states not integrated in EU (Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia). Some recent examples can be

cited: Euroregion Yaroslavna and Euroregion Slobozhanchina were created in 2007 on the Russia and Ukraine border, and the Black Sea Euroregion was created in 2008 comprising regions of five states (Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova and Romania), but open to new members of all riparian states (including Greece).

In addition to this trend, the main characteristic of this possible new period is the ongoing development of a new Regional and Cohesion Policy by the European Union, whose basis was established in 2004. The new policy provides increased and improved action and implementation for sub-state cooperation as a whole. The reform focuses on the very concept of cooperation, as it applies for the first time the concept of “Territorial Cooperation” to refer to the set formed by cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation. It also incorporates changes in Interreg program, which acquires a new name too: “European Territorial Cooperation”, the first program of which covers the period 2007-2013. The total funding has been increased, new objectives and priority areas included, and the eligible areas expanded. Apart from that, the new design pretends to solve some restrictions established in previous programs, such as the inability to plan and manage Interreg projects by euroregions or working communities.

The new Regional Policy is accompanied by the creation of a figure with legal status in 2006, the *European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation* (EGTC). Its importance lies in the advantages compared to existing regulations, both by EU and the Council of Europe (Beltran, 2007; Embid & Fernández de Casadevante, 2008). Despite the expectations generated by the EGTC regulation, only a small number of entities of cooperation have been transformed into it, although a large number of existing Euroregions have shown their interest to do so. However, the adoption of the EGTC regulation indicates a twist in cooperation policy of the European Union, which implies a certain paradox. While the European Union maintains and strengthens the economic orientation developed since the third period, it also assumes a legalistic and, to some extent, administrative orientation, which was assumed only by the Council of Europe until now.

From the same premise –to increase institutional support–, the Council of Europe created in 2009 a similar figure to EGTC, the *Euroregional Co-operation Grouping* (ECG). Specifically, ECG regulation represents a third additional protocol to *Madrid Convention*. The Council of Europe worked in it since 2004 (under the provisional name of “Transfrontier Grouping for Territorial Cooperation”, TGTC), and the advance by European Union on this issue has generated some resentment in both institutions. In any case, the objectives are

similar. For this reason seems that EU and CoE have lost the opportunity of a closer collaboration between them on territorial sub-state cooperation.

A third legal figure has to be added in addition to EGTC and ECG, but in this case it has been legislated by a state. Under the French law on Local Freedoms and Responsibilities, the Eurodistrict or European district was regulated in 2004. Its application covers France, as well as local authorities of neighbouring regions subject to the international agreements of cooperation established between France and its neighbouring countries (Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and the UK). Although it may seem paradoxical, France is becoming one of the European states that give more support and assistance to cooperation initiatives. First, the creation of the Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT) in 1997 must be pointed out. It is a state agency for cross-border cooperation (technical and financial support, assistance in formulating a global strategy for cross-border cooperation, promotion of cooperation networks...) and, at the same time, it is also a network of regions and municipalities from France and its neighbouring states. Second, the constitution of the EUROMOT in 2007, by the MOT along with two other associations, Eixo Atlántico (a network of cities of North-Western Iberian peninsula) and City Twins (a network of twin border cities of Central Europe and Baltic Sea Region). Its targets are the same as MOT, but enlarged to Europe as a whole. It is important to remark that for the first time MOT has accepted in 2009 as a member of its network a territorial authority that has any boundary with France: the Romanian Association for Zone Development of Medgidia (ADZM), at the Romania and Bulgaria border.

Finally, we can add the introduction of a new scale of territorial planning, the macroregional, under the new Regional Policy of the European Union, although it is not directly linked to cross-border cooperation. This scale was already present in interregional and transnational cooperation programs, but until now it has not taken a global macroregional perspective that engages the complete set of actions and instruments for territorial cooperation. The adoption of this approach by the European Commission is based on the Baltic Sea Region experience, which took into account a Macroregional Strategy for this area in late 2009. Currently the EC is working on defining a Macroregional Strategy for the Danube macroregion, which will be scheduled in 2011. Likewise several European regional associations, as the Assembly of European Regions and the Committee of the Regions, have shown their interest in developing macroregional strategies for the Black Sea Region, the North Sea-Channel Region and the Alps-Adria. Others, such as the Mediterranean Arch and Atlantic Arch may be added in a next future.

5. Conclusions

Cross-border cooperation in Europe since World War II, a phenomenon contextualized in a broader process of territorial cooperation (including from supranational cooperation to town twinning agreements), has become one of the most original and successful projects of building a united and cohesive Europe. For that reason cooperation initiatives have been often described as “laboratories of Europe” or “testing laboratories of European integration”. The paper has presented the historical evolution of this phenomenon, which over the period 1950-2010 shows a dramatic growth, in terms of number of initiatives developed (from informal agreements to the building of structures with legal status), of regional distribution, and institutional support. The analysis of the identification of three periods can be summarized as follows: the first period (1950-1979) corresponds to a slow start, a lack of institutional support and a concentration in Western and Northern Europe; the second period (1980-1989) signals the appearance of some legal instruments, a consolidation in the previous areas and an increasing spread towards Southern Europe; and the third period (since 1990) is characterized by the consolidation of legal support, with a strong financial support too, and a great growth rate, particularly in Eastern Europe.

From 2005 onwards, the emergence of a possible fourth period may be identified. The main argument of this fact is a growing and new institutional (legal and financial) support (European Territorial Cooperation program, the European Union EGTC and Council of Europe ECG regulations, EUROMOT...). However, its implementation and expected results are by now more limited than it was initially anticipated. In fact, the expectations generated are not completely satisfied at the moment. Meanwhile, the other two analytical variables for cross-border cooperation (the number of initiatives created and their territorial distribution) do not show substantial changes compared to the third period. In this sense, data show two future developments: on the one hand, the already mentioned fourth period, constructed on the basis of the new instruments; on the other hand, it may also represent just an intensification of the earlier period. In accordance to the last hypothesis, the third period is characterized by the consolidation of institutional support, both legal (Council of Europe) and financial (European Union), and it also continues the development of new initiatives in Eastern Europe borders.

6. References

ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN BORDER REGIONS (1997). *Guía práctica de la cooperación transfronteriza*. Gronau: AEBR & European Commission

- (2004). *Carta de las regiones fronterizas y transfronterizas. Nueva versión*. Gronau: AEBR
- AYKACI, A. (1994). *Transborder regionalization: an analysis of transborder cooperation structures in Western Europe within the context of European Integration and decentralization towards regional and local governments*. Sindelfingen: Libertas-Europäisches Institut
- BELTRAN, Susana (2007). “Qué esperar de la figura de la Agrupación Europea de Cooperación Territorial (AECT) en relación a los organismos de cooperación creados por las Comunidades Autónomas”. *Revista General de Derecho Europeo*, 14, p. 1-35
- BOIRA, Josep Vicent (2004). *Les euroregions. La cooperació regional a Europa. Acords interregionals i la nova política de cohesió territorial*. València: Institut Ignasi Villalonga d’Economia i Empresa
- COUNCIL OF EUROPE (2006). *Report on the current state of the administrative and legal framework of transfrontier co-operation in Europe*. Strasburg: Council of Europe
- DOMINGUEZ, L. (2008). «Quelques considérations sur les origines de la coopération transfrontalière en Europe: 1950-1980». *RECERC. Revista electrònica del Centre de Recerca d’Estudis Catalans*, 2
- EMBID, Antonio & FERNÁNDEZ DE CASADEVANTE, Carlos (2008). *Las agrupaciones europeas de cooperación territorial: Consideraciones desde el Derecho comunitario y el Derecho español*. Madrid: Iustel
- OLIVERAS, X., DURÀ, A. & PERKMANN, M. (2010). “Las regiones transfronterizas: balance de la regionalización de la cooperación transfronteriza en Europa (1958-2007)”. *Documents d’Anàlisi Geogràfica*, 56(1), p. 21-39
- PERKMANN, M. (2003). “Cross-border regions in Europe. Significance and drivers of regional cross-border co-operation”. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 10(2), pp.153-171
- SCHNEIDER, Françoise (2006). *Guide pratique de la coopération transfrontalière*. Paris: Mission Opérationnell Transfrontalière (MOT) & Council of Europe (CoE)
- TRIANAPHYLLIDES, Kyriacos (2005). *Informe sobre la función de las «euroregiones» en el desarrollo de la política regional*. European Parliament: Working Document