



Demographic change in border regions – Cross-border cooperation to safeguard services of general interest

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The **Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe** has examined the opportunities and advantages that cross-border cooperation offers for municipalities. Furthermore, obstacles as well as success factors for the cooperation with stakeholders on the other side of the border were assessed.¹

These are some of the **major findings** of the published working paper:

Starting point

As a result of the effects of demographic change, the safeguarding of services of general interest faces challenges in many German regions. Local authorities are tasked with developing solutions to these challenges and with adapting local structures to current and future circumstances. Cross-border cooperation is one way of tackling these challenges together with municipalities and regions in neighbouring countries. The aim is to draw on the experience of already existing cross-border cooperation and to make the resulting findings available for other cross-border projects.

Research subject

To do so, guided interviews with project managers as well as with those responsible in municipalities and districts were conducted and evaluated. In addition, reports and studies on the projects were analysed. Seven cross-border projects in the fields of health and care, local

¹ Schliffka, Christina (2020): **Demographic change in border regions – Cross-border cooperation to safeguard services of general interest**, Working Paper No. 20, Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe.

supply and transport were examined as exemplary cases. All selected projects are funded by the INTERREG programme of the European Union.

Opportunities of cross-border cooperation

The interviewees see a range of opportunities in cross-border cooperation, such as the possibility of tackling challenges together, learning from each other, pooling resources, the possibility of visibly placing relevant topics of the region and creating added value for the region. Disadvantages of cross-border cooperation are not named.

Challenges for cross-border cooperation

- Cross-border cooperation faces a number of obstacles and challenges on various levels, both within the projects and in terms of the framework conditions for cooperation. Examples include differences in law and administration, unclear responsibilities, competition to national tasks, lack of political support and financial resources, different motives and motivation, language barriers as well as cultural differences between the countries.
- However, local cooperation itself can only have a limited influence on the legal, administrative and political challenges.

Success factors for cross-border cooperation

- Nonetheless, a large number of success factors are identified which can contribute to successful cross-border cooperation. These central factors include a close and trustful cooperation, a structuring of the cooperation that corresponds to its framework conditions and objectives, links with existing contacts and other measures, increased visibility, and perpetuation of cross-border cooperation.
- Particular importance is attributed to citizen involvement as well as voluntary engagement. The expertise, creativity and assumption of responsibility by citizens is an important resource for shaping their living environment. In addition, the voluntary engagement of citizens and local self-management play an increasingly important role when previous structures of services of general interest are no longer in place, i.e. especially in rural areas. Successful cross-border cooperation is also dependent on the acceptance and support of the population. The participation of citizens in the preparation and implementation of cross-border cooperation can make a decisive contribution in this regard.
- Involving as many relevant actors as possible is also part of the success factors that municipalities can actively engage in. The involvement of representatives from various political levels, from local government, municipal institutions, and business, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, from research institutions, associations and welfare organisations as well as other local experts is explicitly mentioned. Good knowledge of the local conditions and a good preparation for the cooperation are described as further helpful competences. The interviewees recommend addressing relevant actors actively, individually and in a targeted manner.
- The challenges facing border regions in safeguarding services of general interest are also recognised at European level. In addition to existing measures geared to facilitate

cooperation, the possibility of being able to apply regulations of one member state in the neighbouring member state is currently being discussed (*Cross-border mechanism*).

The **Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe** is a project of the Institute for Social Work and Social Education (ISS). It provides comparative analyses of socio-political trends and developments across Europe. The project's aim is to promote Europe-wide exchange.

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