

Civil society and cross-border citizenship

Cross-border cooperation addresses the practical needs of people living in border regions, where nearly a third of Europeans reside. Members of civil society were early pioneers of this cooperation through their local initiatives. Today, this work is also important for public policy, but the achievements remain little known to local residents, even though they are the primary beneficiaries.

A shared sense of citizenship

Citizenship is traditionally associated with a given area, most often a state, where borders define rights – such as the right to vote – and duties.

The concept of “cross-border citizenship”, and more broadly that of participation in cross-border civil society, is based on the existence of a shared space. This often brings together populations of different nationalities and language backgrounds, but who face common needs and challenges, some of which predate the very establishment of borders. **How, then, can a sense of belonging lead to “cross-border citizenship”?**

Cross-border territories are veritable laboratories for integration. In these areas, communities and institutions experiment with and build new forms of living together, through innovative practices, perspectives and forms of governance. The border is no longer perceived merely as a dividing line, but also as a space for encounters and an opportunity to affirm one's identity.

Identity is a dynamic process, involving multiple connections. **In border regions, residents sometimes develop a ‘culture of in-between’, fuelled by shared challenges, experiences and common values.** This culture forms the foundation of cross-border citizenship, understood as active participation in a shared space, despite national differences. **This form of citizenship resonates particularly strongly in the context of European integration,** where European citizenship reinforces a sense of belonging and unity across borders.

► Publications by the CESER Grand Est

In October 2020, the CESER Grand Est published **an opinion on how to foster the participation of a cross-border civil society** in the Grand Est region. The report recommends **eight actions to establish a participatory democracy that is close to citizens**, covering cross-border identity, multilingualism, youth and other key issues. In June 2025, the CESER expanded on this discussion with a new opinion, which builds on and updates the 2020 proposals. The report emphasises the everyday experiences of residents and multi-level governance, with a view to strengthening European integration and territorial cohesion.



Cross-border meeting as part of the 'KM Solidarity' initiative of the Eurodistrict Strasbourg-Ortenau

Civil society in decision-making processes

The challenge is to demonstrate to citizens the added value of cross-border policies and to involve them in local life and decision-making processes. This is also an opportunity to highlight cross-border needs and remove obstacles. Initiatives have been taken by public authorities; here are a few examples.

Forums and councils

➤ The Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai Eurometropolis Forum (FR/BE):

comprising eighty representatives of Belgian and French civil society, it puts forward proposals to elected representatives and acts as a forum for participatory democracy.

➤ The Citizens' Forums of the Trinational Metropolitan Region (RMT) of the Upper Rhine (FR/DE/CH):

the 'workshops of the future' held in Strasbourg, Karlsruhe and Basel engage civil society by gathering citizens' proposals on how to develop the RMT. The results are passed on to the region's decision-makers.

➤ The Cross-Border Citizens' Council of the SaarMoselle

Eurodistrict (FR/DE): this council comprises 40 French and German citizens tasked with initiating dialogue on various topics and providing a platform to present proposals and opinions to the Eurodistrict.

➤ The Greater Geneva Urban Area Forum (FR/CH): a consultative body for civil society across the Greater Geneva area, this forum is a key player in the social and cultural development of the region. As an advisory body to the Greater Geneva authorities, it issues opinions and proposals, either when referred to it or on its own initiative.

➤ Youth Councils (Interreg): some programmes have set up youth councils to better involve young people in decision-making bodies and projects, such as the Franco-Italian Interreg programme ALCOTRA, which promotes youth engagement in cross-border cooperation.

Changes in the digital landscape and cross-border media

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the digital space has emerged as an additional tool to promote and organise citizen participation. **'E-participation' gathers the ideas and opinions of many citizens** via a simple form. As a genuine tool for 'e-democracy', this helps bring people on either side of a border closer together, particularly where it is difficult to cross the border physically. For example, in 2023, the [Espace Catalan Transfrontalier](#) launched an online survey to seek citizens' views on its future, receiving 1,095 responses and 377 citizen contributions within three months.

Similarly, the democratisation of information through the internet and social media enables people living in border regions to connect with one another and learn about each other. **Media thus play an essential role** in building a cross-border identity and fostering a sense of belonging to the region. Whilst they help raise awareness of local cross-border projects and policies, media are of particular interest to citizens when they highlight initiatives that have a direct impact on their daily lives.

Examples include ['Notélé'](#) and its cross-border programmes, the European ['MEDIACONNECT' project](#) (a media platform for the Franco-Belgian border region), the Franco-Italian magazine [nosalpes.eu](#), and ['Voisins Nachbarn'](#), a Franco-German cross-border news website.

Consultations and citizen forums

➤ Grand Est Region (FR/DE/CH): following the model of the 2018 cross-border citizens' consultations, the Region regularly distributes online questionnaires to gather citizens' views on the Upper Rhine Interreg programme, cross-border issues, and their experiences of the border, whilst also inviting them to suggest improvements. The data is reported to the European Commission.

➤ Cross-border vision for Greater Geneva (FR/CH): with a view to developing a cross-border territorial vision for 2050, eight citizens' workshops were organised in spring 2023, providing an opportunity for citizens to discuss issues relating to the green transition and social inequalities, whilst identifying priorities and objectives.

➤ The Eurométropole Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai's 'Citizens'

Forum on Europe (FR/BE): with the support of volunteer citizens, the Eurométropole has established a forum for discussion between citizens and European institutions. Launched in May 2022, it enables citizens to raise issues and draw up concrete proposals for European institutions.



© 'Forum d'agglomération' (Urban Area Forum) of the Greater Geneva

Micro-project funds

A source of funding for civil society

Within cross-border regions, micro-project funds – also known as ‘small projects funds’ – have proved to be essential tools for developing community-based projects. **They bring cross-border cooperation to life by turning the ideas of residents on both sides of the border into reality.**

Under Interreg, micro-projects can be funded by the ERDF. Co-financing and funding levels vary depending on the programme. Indeed, it is the competent authorities that take decisions relating to their own territory. The common feature of these funds remains the limited financial resources allocated to them.

Over the 2021–2027 period, and for the first time for most of them, several Interreg programmes along France’s borders include mechanisms for micro-projects or small-scale projects, notably: ALCOTRA , POCTEFA, Marittimo, Upper Rhine, Greater Region and France-Wallonia-Flanders. This is further evidence of the growing interest in this type of initiative, which is ‘closer to citizens’, both on behalf of the European Commission and programme partners.

Objectives of micro-projects

- **To strengthen community life** through cross-border initiatives and improve residents’ quality of life;
- **To increase citizens’ sense of identification with the cross-border area**, and to create or strengthen a shared sense of belonging and a shared sense of citizenship in these territories;
- **To support new, practical and innovative collaborations** that enable the acquisition of experience in cross-border cooperation;
- **To intensify connections** through exchanges and population mobility;
- **Raise awareness** of cross-border cooperation.



©Trinational Eurodistrict of Basel micro-project. Day of exchanges between groups of school-children from Huningue and Weil-am-Rhein on the banks of the Rhine

Micro-projects strengthen trust between citizens and institutions, whilst contributing to the overall objectives of cross-border cooperation. This is a first step towards fostering co-development and the emergence of a cross-border civil society. These projects involve small non-profit organisations (associations, schools, small local authorities and inter-municipal bodies) and, in some cases, SMEs. They thus offer structures unfamiliar with European funds the opportunity to engage simply and effectively in cross-border cooperation initiatives.

Examples

➤ **The Euroregion Nouvelle-Aquitaine-Euskadi-Navarre (FR/ES)** regularly launches ‘calls for micro-projects’. In 2025, it allocated €500,000 to 19 initiatives as part of its ‘Euroregional Citizenship’ call. Examples of supported projects include ‘ASOCIAKIN’, a group of stakeholders that developed a joint cultural programme, and ‘EUSKOPCYCLE’, which created a ‘Euroregional Cycling Platform’.

➤ **Support funds also exist in the Upper Rhine region (FR/DE/CH)**, such as [the Eurodistrict PAMINA’s ‘Small Projects Fund’](#) for youth, sport, culture and sustainable development initiatives, [the ‘Eurhena ACT Fund’](#) for cultural and tourism projects, and [the Trinational Eurodistrict of Basel’s \(ETB\) ‘Encounter Funds’ \(including school exchanges\)](#).

➤ **The Conseil du Léman (FR/CH)** allocates funding to sports projects to strengthen social cohesion and community life. It has long supported cultural projects (both in the Lake Geneva region and cross-border), and in 2024 began a review of the distribution and circulation of performances across the Lake Geneva region.

➤ **The EGTC Alzette Belval (FR/LU)** also supports small cross-border projects led by local associations, local authorities and grassroots organisations. Through its Charter of Commitment for more cross-border projects, it encourages local initiatives that promote cultural, social, and educational exchanges among the region’s residents.



© EGTC Alzette-Belval. Festive cross-border gatherings in the Alzette-Belval area, on the France-Luxembourg border

Persistent challenges

A number of obstacles to the smooth running of micro-projects remain, whether financial, linguistic or cultural. **The organisations targeted by micro-project funding opportunities often have little experience with Interreg** and, depending on the region, face complex administrative procedures.

Whilst cross-border organisations fund projects relating to youth, culture, education (including bilingualism) or environmental protection, Interreg micro-projects cover a wider range of topics.

Proficiency in the partner's language is one of the main obstacles to the emergence of a cross-border civil society.

Similarly, even though stakeholders are learning to seize opportunities, some potential Interreg project partners are discouraged by their perception that **European procedures are becoming increasingly complex**, or that they lack the necessary capacity to set up a project.

To address these challenges, institutions are seeking to simplify procedures in order to attract small organisations and fulfil the primary aim of micro-projects, namely the inclusion of civil society in cross-border and European cooperation.

This initiative, supported by a [guide to public consultations](#) drawn up for the occasion with the help of the MOT, highlighted the opportunities and obstacles in these territories and led to the publication of a [Harvesting Report](#).

Example of initiatives on the ground: In 2024, during the European elections, the MOT, together with the EGTC Euroflandria, engaged in [a dialogue with Belgian and French border residents](#) on local, cross-border and European issues. These exchanges 'among neighbours', focusing on their experiences of the border and opportunities for cooperation, provided a forum for discussing the challenges still to be overcome in this 'everyday Europe' of cross-border life.



Citizens' dialogue organised by the MOT and the Euroflandria EGTC, in Callicanes, in June 2024

Other initiatives

Civil society has been the focus of specific cross-border cooperation initiatives led by local, cross-border and European institutions, even before the launch of Interreg (1990). Today, public authorities at all levels, particularly the EU level, are criticised for being too distant from citizens. In this context, it is important to identify, promote and support initiatives involving residents of border regions, which have long remained in the shadow of larger-scale cross-border projects.

Public consultations on Europe

Public consultations play an important role in the debate on the future of Europe and of Interreg post-2027. More than 10,000 citizens (including 5,000 from border regions) and organisations were able to take part in the largest consultation ever organised on the future prospects for cross-border cooperation.

Conclusion

Re-establishing links between citizens on either side of the border through initiatives promoting bilingualism and intercultural exchanges (school activities, sporting and cultural events) remains essential for the future of cross-border cooperation. Against a backdrop of mistrust towards Europe, these funding mechanisms, such as micro-project funds, make a visible contribution to the emergence of a cross-border and European civil society. These initiatives deserve to be better known.

Find all resources on cross-border cooperation,
under the theme 'Cross-border citizenship':

<https://www.espaces-transfrontaliers.org/en/themes/cross-border-citizenship/>