

BRIDGING BORDERS: DOES CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION SHAPE IDENTITIES AND COMMUNITIES IN THE UPPER ADRIATIC?

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Abstract: Does cross-border cooperation in the Upper Adriatic, which includes parts of Italy and Slovenia, significantly impact regional identities and foster community cohesion? This study explores Europeanization and the effects of EU-funded initiatives like Interreg, highlighting how top-down approaches combined with bottom-up responses promote regional integration and foster a multi-layered citizenship that transcends national boundaries. Through a practice analytical framework, the collaborative dynamics among local, regional, and supra-national actors are examined, particularly in the context of cross-border projects that offer socio-economic and cultural benefits. The analysis focuses on communities of practice, such as minority groups, stakeholders, and institutional bodies, and their role in fostering cultural and socio-political connections.

Key Words: EU integration, cross-border cooperation, cross-border regions, ethnic minorities, Practice Theory

1. Framework of Analysis: Cross-Border Cooperation and European Integration in the Upper Adriatic

Borders studies, cross-border cooperation, identity, and communities within the context of the Upper Adriatic Region offers a rich terrain for understanding how spatial boundaries influence social dynamics. The concept of borders has evolved significantly, transcending their traditional function as mere demarcators of state sovereignty. Borders are now seen as dynamic and porous entities that not only separate but also connect different regions, allowing for the emergence of unique cross-border interactions and identities (Prokkola et al. 2015).

Cross-border cooperation, as facilitated by European Union initiatives such as the INTERREG programs, plays a critical role in transforming these border regions. These programs aim to promote regional cohesion and competitiveness, often leading to the development of new social and economic centers that straddle national boundaries (Prokkola et al. 2015). This cooperation is not merely institutional but deeply intertwined with the lived experiences and identities of the people inhabiting these regions.

Identity in this context is not a static attribute but an active performance shaped by ongoing social practices and interactions. The concept of regional identity, as discussed by Paasi (1986), suggests that identity is constructed

through collective narratives that distinguish “our region” from others. This process is especially pronounced in border regions, where identities often reflect a blend of national, local, and transnational influences. Hence identity is defined as a concept that is not fixed but is instead socially constructed and constantly evolving. It is shaped and reshaped through interactions and experiences within various contexts. This means that identity is something that individuals or groups continuously negotiate and redefine based on their social environments, practices, and relationships. It is not a static characteristic but a dynamic process that reflects how individuals or groups see themselves and how they are perceived by others (Paasi 1996; Paasi et al. 2018).

Communities within these borderlands are similarly complex, often defined by shared cultural, economic, and historical ties that transcend national borders. These communities are not homogenous but are characterized by a multiplicity of identities and affiliations, shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary cross-border interactions (Prokkola et al. 2015).

Community is conceptualised as a social unit that is characterized by a sense of solidarity among its members. This solidarity is often rooted in shared attributes such as geographic location, common interests, or shared values. Unlike identity, which is more about self-perception and social negotiation, community focuses on the collective aspect—how a group of people come together based on shared characteristics or goals. It is more about the bonds that connect individuals within a group and the sense of belonging that arises from these connections (Paasi 1996; Anderson and O’Dowd 1999).

The distinction between the two lies in their focus: identity is more about individual or group self-perception and its continuous construction, while community centers on the shared bonds and sense of togetherness within a group (Paasi 1989).

In the Upper Adriatic Region, these theoretical concepts take on practical significance. The region’s history of shifting borders and diverse cultural influences provides a fertile ground for examining how cross-border cooperation shapes identities and communities. The overall question addressed in this article is the following one: To what extent do cross-border cooperation practices in the Upper Adriatic, formally initiated by the EU but also driven by local stakeholders and ethnic minorities, influence regional identities and community cohesion?

Addressing this question requires an exploration of socio-economic and political dynamics within the specific socio-political and historical context of the region. This exploration will reveal the extent to which such cooperation fosters a sense of shared identity and community across national boundaries, or whether it reinforces divisions.

To address the overall question of the impact of cross-border cooperation on regional identities and community cohesion, this article employs Practice Theory, with a specific focus on cross-border practice communities (Gadiner 2017).

Practice Theory provides a robust framework for examining the everyday practices and interactions that underpin social phenomena, offering insights into the processes that sustain or transform the social order within the Upper Adriatic Region. According to Gadinger, practice communities can be defined as a collective group of individuals who engage in a shared practice, where the knowledge, actions, and norms of that practice are collectively understood, developed, and maintained through repeated interactions. These communities are characterized by a shared repertoire of practices, norms, and understandings that enable members to coordinate their activities effectively. The concept emphasizes the collective and social dimensions of knowledge, focusing on how practices are performed and sustained within the group, leading to the formation of a social order grounded in these shared activities.

The choice of Practice Theory is particularly pertinent in order to address the question posed in this research for several reasons. First, it allows for a analysis of how cross-border interactions at the micro-level reflect and shape broader socio-political dynamics. This theory emphasizes the role of human agency in the continuous creation and re-creation of social life, challenging more static, structuralist approaches (Schatzki 2012). Furthermore, focusing on cross-border practice communities helps highlight the role of shared practices in developing a sense of community across national boundaries. These communities are not just defined by geographical proximity but by the shared practices and narratives that emerge from regular interactions across borders (Adler-Nissen 2016).

By exploring how everyday practices contribute to the construction of regional identities and the fostering of community cohesion, we can offer a nuanced analysis of the interplay between institutional initiatives and local realities. This approach not only aligns with contemporary shifts towards more practice-oriented research in European integration studies but also responds to calls for integrating more localized, people-centered perspectives into the analysis of cross-border cooperation (Adler-Nissen 2016; Gadinger 2017) as will be better explained in the following sections.

2. Case study approach, data and methods

The methodology adopted for this study employs a qualitative research approach (Yin 2009). Empirical data used for this research has been collected through popular accounts of border and cross-border regional activities (newspaper articles, Youtube videos), an extensive analysis of official EU, national and regional planning reports and policy documents have been analyzed. A total of twenty-two semi-structured interviews have been conducted with institutional actors as politicians, cross-border cities socio-economic representatives, private actors, cross-border agencies and representatives of regional development agencies in cross-border areas. The interviews have been analysed through a

critical discourse analysis that aimed at single out social practices that influence ideas, values, and norms (Caldas-Coulthard et al. 2003).

The selection of actors to be interviewed has been based on a two steps procedure. First, actors have been identified for the role they play within cross-border cities and in EU institutional bodies that deal with CBC issues. For this step I relied both on official documentation and my previous research network. A second set of interviews was conducted following a snowball sampling technique. At the end of each interview, actors have been asked to nominate a few prominent stakeholders in the field of CBC, and if it was possible to establish contact with them. During the interviews actors were asked to elaborate on the conceptualization of «cross-border cities», “border community”, “border identity”, “community” and practices. I invited my interviewees to discuss joint activities developed in cross-border cities, the planning vision of the cross-border zone, the long-run vision of the socio-economic, political and territorial development of these zones, the obstacles encountered, and the understanding of the European and national integration values.

3. Cross-Border Practices and Regional Identity Transformation in the Upper Adriatic

In this section, I will focus on the main features of practice theories in order to then operationalise it to cross-border cooperation. Practice theory emphasizes the importance of routinized behaviors, known as practices, which are composed of interconnected elements: materials, competences, and meaning (Adler and Pouliot 2011). “Materials” refer to the physical objects and technologies involved in practices, such as the infrastructures and economic tools used in cross-border cooperation in Europe, like bridges and communication networks that facilitate integration. “Competence” involves the skills and knowledge necessary to carry out these practices, exemplified by the expertise needed to effectively navigate and implement cross-border policies and initiatives. “Meaning” pertains to the shared understanding and significance attributed to these practices, which, in the context of European cooperation, includes the collective identity and values that support and motivate collaborative efforts beyond national borders.

Practice Theory is particularly useful for understanding EU cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation (CBC). By focusing on practices, we can analyze the ways in which shared knowledge, cultural codes, and symbolic systems are enacted, sustained, and transformed through the routinized activities and interactions of cross-border communities. These practices shape communities actions and constitute their cross-border social life (Reckwitz 2002). Practices, as actions and social relations, produce and shape spaces (Soja 1985). The dynamic interaction between individual agency and broader structural contexts is central to practice theory (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Paasi 1986), especially in the process of “institutionalizing a region.”

As defined by Paasi, this institutionalization occurs in four stages: the emergence of regional consciousness, the formation of a regional identity through socio-spatial processes, the creation of institutional frameworks to support this identity, and the subsequent transformation of the region into a recognized and functional administrative entity (Paasi 1986).

As this identity solidifies, institutional frameworks are established to support and formalize cross-border collaboration, ensuring that administrative policies and practices reflect the unique binational character of the region. As put from one interviewee who participated to this research:

The role of the Slovenian and Italian communities is to promote joint activities that foster the exchange and understanding of each other's culture and language. These activities range from contemporary practices, through Interreg projects, to efforts that aim to leave a lasting impact. Additionally, there is a focus on establishing landmarks within the region that highlight and celebrate the our single cultures (interview with a representative of the Italian minority in Slovenia, August 2023).

In the interview, the establishment of a solidified cross-border identity between Slovenian and Italian communities is the first crucial step. As this identity strengthens, it prompts the creation of institutional frameworks designed specifically to support and formalize the collaboration between these communities. These frameworks play a vital role in organizing and sustaining joint initiatives, ensuring they are not ephemeral but part of a lasting strategy.

Further solidifying this relationship, these frameworks influence the administrative policies and practices within the region. They ensure that the unique binational character of the region is acknowledged and integrated into local governance, promoting a harmonious and integrated coexistence that benefits both communities. This systematic approach not only fosters cultural exchange but also embeds the diverse identity of the region into its administrative DNA.

Another example is the EGTC-GO, established between Gorizia, Nova Gorica, and Sempeter along the Italian-Slovenian border in 2011.

The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) is a legal instrument established by the European Union (EU) under Regulation 1082/2006. It allows regional and local authorities from different EU member states to form cooperation groupings as legal entities. The EGTC's primary purpose is to facilitate and promote cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation, thus supporting territorial cohesion across the EU. By providing a stable legal framework, the EGTC enables public actors at different levels to collaborate on joint projects and initiatives, often bypassing traditional state-controlled channels, thereby fostering multi-level governance within the EU (Nadalutti 2013).

The EGTC-GO, in particular, aims at simplifying collaboration and unifying urban planning to address the unique challenges faced by this cross-border region (Nadalutti 2020). A local politician states: “Certainly, before the establishment of the EGTC, Gorizia and Nova Gorica were quite marginal compared to their national centers. However, these cities have successfully capitalized on their cooperation” (interview with the author 2022). The EGTC-GO functions more like a laboratory: being composed of local municipalities, it facilitates simpler interactions. Cross-border actors meet regularly on a daily basis” (interview with a regional-level executive 2022). Another actor shares the same view: “We, as the EGTC, have a single administration made up of people from both sides of the border, we talk daily with people from the three municipalities, and this produces new ideas, new projects. From here, our vision of the area as a unique entity: for us, it is ‘the territory.’ The interview clearly shows that ‘ideas’ and ‘projects’ emerge from and because of the practice of meeting regularly and not vice versa. The same interviewee continues:

And while mayors used to meet two or three times a year, now they talk even three times a day. But, of course, it would not have been possible without the regulatory foundation provided by the 2006 European Regulation (EGTC) that established cross-border territorial cooperation groups (Thomas Konrad, interview by Rosà 2023).

Local and regional administrative actors, when interviewed, always highlight that this constant interaction leads to the transformation of the area into a recognized, functional, and social administrative entity that transcends mere geographic union, embodying a model of integrated European urban development. An administrative official of the EGTC-GO stated in an interview with the Osservatorio Balcani (2023):

With Slovenia’s entry into the Euro area, every barrier dissolved and there was no longer any tangible sign of the border, except in the memory of those who had lived through more complicated times. But young people no longer say ‘I’m going there,’ but rather I’m going to that specific place, I’m going to that certain store: they say the name of the place, not ‘in Italy’ or ‘in Slovenia.’

Surely, this interview aligns with practice theory as it highlights how daily activities and interactions, fundamental elements of practice theory, are redefined and shaped by broader economic and political changes, incorporating new social practices within the community.

However, it must also be considered that this is the official perspective, which could undergo significant revision as local communities and ethnic minorities

present alternative viewpoints. Fieldwork led for this research clearly shows that there are still cultural fragmentation and the pressing need for stronger mechanisms to preserve distinct identities within the framework of cross-border cooperation, thereby complicating the current narrative of smooth integration and highlighting the delicate balance required to maintain cultural diversity in these regions (interviews with the author between 2020 and 2023 that generally lead to this conclusion).

Building on this, the integration of practice theory with the concept of “intercultural citizenship” as articulated by Kymlicka (2017) further enriches our understanding of cross-border cooperation. By viewing “intercultural citizenship” through the lens of practice theory, we can appreciate how multicultural states must navigate daily practices and routines to promote successful cross-border cooperation that considers the diverse cultural practices, identities, and values of all involved, thereby fostering an inclusive environment that goes beyond mere tolerance to active engagement and mutual respect.

This perspective highlights that cross-border initiatives are not only institutional but also deeply embedded in the lived experiences and intercultural interactions of the individuals involved. This synergy between practice theory and intercultural citizenship underscores the importance of fostering shared civic values and active participation across cultural lines, ensuring that collaborative efforts transcend mere structural agreements to become meaningful, community-driven processes.

Kymlicka conceptualises “intercultural citizenship” as a framework that seeks to harmonize the recognition and accommodation of cultural diversity with the promotion of shared civic values and active participation within a democratic society. This concept emphasizes that while individuals and groups maintain their distinct cultural identities, they also engage in meaningful interactions and dialogues across cultural lines, fostering mutual understanding and respect.

However, while Kymlicka’s framework is notably forward-looking, it has been critiqued for potentially oversimplifying the complexities of intercultural citizenship. The belief that fostering shared civic values and mutual respect across cultural lines can effortlessly bridge deep-seated historical injustices and structural inequalities is ambitious but may be overly idealistic. Critics argue that Kymlicka’s model may not fully address the persistent power asymmetries and the challenging negotiations necessary for genuine intercultural dialogue and cooperation. These concerns raise critical questions about the extent to which Kymlicka’s vision of intercultural citizenship can be achieved without more robust mechanisms to tackle these underlying issues (Levrau 2019).

In this article, as mentioned above, I read “intercultural citizenship” through the lens of Practice Theory. Hence, intercultural citizenship can be understood as a set of practices that individuals and communities engage in to navigate the coexistence of cultural diversity with shared civic values. For example, in a

democratic society, intercultural citizenship is practiced through everyday interactions that involve recognizing and accommodating cultural differences while simultaneously participating in civic activities that promote common democratic principles. This might include routine practices such as voting, participating in community meetings, or engaging in public discourse, where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds bring their unique perspectives to the table while working together toward shared goals.

Operationlised this to cross-border cooperation, it is apparent that intercultural citizenship is important for the development of cross-border communities. These communities, shaped by sustained interactions and shared initiatives across national borders, embody the practical realization of intercultural citizenship. By participating in EU CBC programs, local actors and minority groups engage in transnational practices that not only reinforce their distinct cultural identities but also contribute to a broader sense of European citizenship that transcends national boundaries. The continuous engagement of these communities in cross-border projects has led to the emergence of new forms of citizenship that are characterized by mutual understanding, shared interests, and the redefinition of traditional national loyalties (Nadalutti 2014). This development highlights the potential of cross-border cooperation to transform and integrate border regions into cohesive and cooperative spaces, where the rigidities of national borders are softened, allowing for the flourishing of multicultural and multilingual societies (Nadalutti 2012).

The promotion of shared civic values and active participation is operationalized through the habitual engagement in democratic processes and public life. Practice theory helps us see that these are not merely abstract ideals but are grounded in the everyday actions of citizens. For instance, the “PRIMIS” project, part of the Interreg V-A Italy-Slovenia 2014-2020 Programme, demonstrates the practice of dialogue across cultural lines. This project involved the restoration of the Gravisi-Buttorai Palace in Koper, transforming it into a Multimedia Center that fosters intercultural exchange between Italian and Slovenian communities. The ongoing interaction and negotiation required for such collaborative efforts significantly contribute to the development of intercultural citizenship by promoting mutual understanding and respect. This illustrates how community forums and collaborative projects can serve as practical examples of operationalizing civic engagement through cross-cultural practices (Interreg V 2014-2020).

This commitment to fostering intercultural understanding through practical engagement lays the foundation for a broader advocacy of inclusive policies. For example, regular consultation with minority groups that live these territories in policy-making processes, or the inclusion of diverse cultural narratives in public education, are practices that embody intercultural citizenship. Through these practices, the balance between diversity and unity is maintained, as individuals

routinely engage in actions that reinforce both their cultural identities and their commitment to a cohesive, democratic society. The EDUKA project (2012-2015) under the Italy-Slovenia Cross-border Cooperation Programme is a clear example of promoting intercultural understanding. It involved the Italian minority in Slovenia and the Slovenian minority in Italy in developing educational materials and organizing cultural exchanges. This project fostered intercultural dialogue by integrating diverse cultural narratives into public education, thereby enhancing cultural identity while promoting unity across the border (Vidau 2015).

Moreover, building on the conceptualization of intercultural citizenship and its practical implications, the routines and interactions observed in the EGTC-GO illustrate how these practices are deeply intertwined with and shape the institutional frameworks that facilitate cross-border initiatives.

These practices are carried out by “communities of practice,” such as those formed within the EGTC-GO, where regular interactions among cross-border actors, including local politicians, administrators, and ethnic national minority groups, foster the development of shared projects and ideas that drive cross-border cooperation.

They are united by a mutual commitment and shared knowledge that guides action (Wenger 1998; Adler & Pouliot 2011). Following Wenger’s (1998) concept of “communities of practice,” it is evident that such communities are not just theoretical constructs but have real-world applications that can be observed in the European Union’s approach to regional integration. Moreover, as elaborated by Gadinger (2021), these communities not only shape but are also shaped by the socio-political contexts in which they operate, highlighting the recursive nature of practice in cross-border cooperation.

This aligns with Kymlicka’s (2017) notion of intercultural citizenship, where such communities contribute to the development of shared values and norms across diverse cultural contexts, reinforcing the interdependence between identity and practice.

In a nutshell, practice theory provides a robust framework for analyzing and understanding the complexities of EU integration and cross-border cooperation. It highlights the interaction between individual agency and structural contexts, the importance of routinized practices, and the role of collective knowledge in shaping and transforming cross-border spaces. This perspective is crucial for developing sustainable and effective cross-border policies and practices within the EU (CEI 2023; EC 2023). In the next section, the historical background of the case study is going to be introduced in order to then be analysed through the lens of the analytical framework.

4. Upper Adriatic History and Cross-Border Cooperation

The Upper Adriatic region, particularly the borderlands between Italy and Slovenia, is steeped in a complex history marked by the continuous redrawing of

national borders, cultural interweaving, and the evolving identities of its inhabitants. Historically, this area was an integral part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a multi-ethnic domain that fostered a rich tapestry of cultures, languages, and traditions. However, the end of World War I and the subsequent disintegration of the empire triggered significant geopolitical upheavals. The resulting treaties, particularly the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920, dramatically reshaped the region's political map by transferring substantial Slovene territories to the Kingdom of Italy. This abrupt change in sovereignty brought approximately 300,000 Slovenes under Italian rule, disrupting established cultural norms and sparking tensions that would have long-lasting repercussions (Nadalutti 2015; Sluga 2001).

Similarly, the Italian National minority, primarily residing along the Slovene littoral, experienced significant shifts in their socio-political environment following the reconfiguration of borders. The Treaty of Osimo in 1975 further formalized minority protections for both Slovenes in Italy and Italians in Yugoslavia, including rights to language, press, and cultural autonomy. However, while these protections existed on paper, their implementation was inconsistent, leading to varied experiences among the Italian communities in Slovenia. Despite constitutional guarantees, many of these rights were often underutilized or remained symbolic rather than practical, reflecting the broader challenges of minority integration and recognition within national frameworks (Rigo and Rahola 2005).

The border delineated by the Treaty of Osimo in 1975, initially functioning as a symbol of division, progressively evolved into a zone of economic opportunity, particularly from the late 1970s through the 1990s. This transformation was marked by significant cross-border employment and economic exchanges, particularly involving Slovenians and Italians residing near the border. This Treaty not only formalized the border but also incorporated provisions for the protection of Slovenians in Italy and Italians in Yugoslavia, which played a crucial role in fostering cross-border cooperation. These protections were integral in creating an environment conducive to economic collaboration by ensuring the socio-economic development of minority communities, thus enabling their active participation in the local economy and cross-border initiatives (Bufon 2003).

However, it is important to critically assess the challenges and limitations of these integration efforts. The historical tensions and deeply rooted mistrust between these communities often hindered true integration, despite the legal frameworks in place. For instance, the practical implementation of minority rights, particularly for the Slovenians in Italy, was fraught with challenges, as local and national authorities often prioritized national interests over genuine minority protection. This resulted in a situation where cross-border cooperation, while beneficial, did not fully address the underlying social and cultural divides (Sluga 2001; Bufon et al. 2014).

In Slovenia, the situation for the ethnic Italian minority was also challenging, despite formal protections (Rigo and Rahola 2007). While the rights of the Italian minority were guaranteed in Slovenia soon after World War II, effective protection was only implemented by the mid-1980s. The inconsistency between the envisaged and actual conditions for ethnic minorities persisted, revealing a gap between formal rights and their practical application (interviews with the author 2022). Moreover, after Slovenia's independence in 1991, the Italian minority experienced an economic turning point rather than a political one, as they neither sought additional rights nor received further protections. The disparity between the formal legal frameworks and their implementation resulted in significant challenges for the Italian minority, highlighting the broader issues of integration and minority rights within the region (Šabec 2005; Rigo and Rahola 2005).

Cross-border economic cooperation, already started in the 1960s and 1970s. One notable example is the Gorizia-Nova Gorica Trade Fair. This fair was a vital platform for economic exchange, bringing together traders, businesses, and local authorities from both sides of the border. The event not only facilitated commerce but also served as a cultural bridge, encouraging interaction and cooperation between the communities. This initiative was particularly important during a period when the border between Italy and Slovenia (then part of Yugoslavia) was still heavily controlled, making such cross-border interaction rare and valuable. It was then significantly accelerated by the European integration process (Bufon 2006). Another well-documented case is the environmental management of the Soca/Isonzo River. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Italian and Slovenian authorities tried to work together on issues related to water management, pollution control, and flood prevention in the shared river basin. This cooperation was one of the first environmental initiatives between the two countries, setting the groundwork for future cross-border environmental policies (Vizintin et al. 2018).

Hence, while various forms of cross-border cooperation existed earlier, the establishment of the Interreg program in 1990 marked a pivotal moment. Interreg, an EU-funded initiative, was specifically designed to promote cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation. It provided a structured framework and funding to foster socio-economic linkages across borders, addressing common challenges and unlocking regional growth potential. Through Interreg, regions that were previously isolated began collaborating more closely, thereby enhancing European cohesion and integration.

These initiatives fostered a synergistic relationship between Slovenian and Italian entrepreneurs, contributing to a more integrated and economically dynamic border region (Panteia 2009). However, it is essential to recognize that this process was not without its obstacles. The integration of two distinct economic systems, with differing levels of development and institutional frameworks, posed significant challenges (Nadalutti 2015; Vizintin et al. 2018).

Moreover, the administrative and bureaucratic hurdles, particularly on the Slovenian side, where the regional level was less developed, often impeded the smooth execution of cross-border projects (Faro 2005).

According to Bufon (2002), Slovenians from areas such as Nova Gorica, Koper, and other towns close to the Italian border frequently crossed into Italy for work. Many of these Slovenians were bilingual, speaking both Slovenian and Italian, which facilitated their integration into the Italian labor market. This linguistic ability was particularly important, as it allowed them to navigate the Italian workplace and communicate effectively with their employers and colleagues. Similarly, the Italian national minority in Slovenia, particularly concentrated in towns like Koper and Piran, benefited from their bilingualism in Italian and Slovenian. This community, officially recognized as an autochthonous minority, had their rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia as early as the 1960s, with further protections enshrined in the Yugoslav federal constitution of 1974 (Šabec 2007). Despite these formal guarantees, practical implementation only took place in the mid-1980s.

The Italian minority has played a pivotal role in advancing cross-border cooperation between Slovenia and Italy, particularly after Slovenia's independence in 1991. This cooperation has extended far beyond cultural exchanges, deeply influencing economic and institutional relationships and significantly shaping the bilateral ties between these two neighboring countries.

A concrete example of this is the "SiT" (Smart Tourist Information System: Interreg V-A Italy-Slovenia 2014-2020) project in the municipalities of Koper and Piran, where the Italian minority is concentrated. Supported by Interreg funds, this project aimed to create a network of smart tourist information points that enhance the tourist experience by providing multilingual services, including Italian. This initiative not only boosted local tourism but also facilitated closer economic ties between Slovenia and Italy by making the region more accessible and attractive to Italian tourists.

In addition to tourism, the Italian minority has been instrumental in the economic integration of the border regions through projects like the "CROSSMOBY" project. This project, also supported by Interreg, focused on improving cross-border mobility between Slovenia and Italy, enhancing public transport links in regions with significant Italian populations such as the coastal area of Koper. The project aimed to reduce traffic congestion and promote sustainable transport options, directly benefiting cross-border commuters, many of whom are part of the Italian minority.

Furthermore, the Italian minority has actively contributed to educational and cultural institutions that foster bilingualism and biculturalism. For example, in the coastal town of Izola, bilingual schools supported by the Italian minority provide education in both Slovenian and Italian, promoting a shared cultural identity and

strengthening cross-border ties through educational exchanges and collaborative programs with Italian schools (Moroz 2020; Šabec 2005; Bufon 2003).

This cultural diplomacy has helped to break down historical barriers and build trust between the communities on either side of the border. The extent of this impact can be seen in the increased cultural affinity and cooperation between Slovenian and Italian communities, which has led to a more integrated cross-border region (Moroz 2020).

On the basis of the fieldwork conducted for this research between 2021 and 2023, while cultural diplomacy has indeed facilitated a deeper understanding and cooperation between Slovenian and Italian communities, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that persist, particularly regarding the minorities that live these territories. Interviews with local Italian representatives (interviews with the author 2023) reveal, for instance, significant concerns about the erosion of Italian language and cultural presence in Slovenia. Despite the positive strides made through joint cultural initiatives, there is a noticeable decline in the knowledge and use of Italian, especially among younger generations. This regression is evident in educational settings, where Italian is increasingly marginalized, and in the public sphere, where bilingual signage and media access are limited. Moreover, the enforcement of language laws, such as the requirement to translate historical Italian toponyms into Slovenian, reflects a broader trend of diminishing bilingualism, which some argue undermines the very essence of cross-border cultural integration (interview with the author 2023).

These challenges raise critical questions about the long-term viability of creating a cohesive cross-border community and identity. The struggle of the Italian minority to maintain its cultural and linguistic heritage suggests that the focus may need to shift from building a shared identity to ensuring the survival of individual identities first. The concept of “unity in diversity” is central to this cross-border cooperation, yet it must be balanced with the imperative to preserve the distinctiveness of each culture. Without this balance, the drive for unity risks overshadowing the very diversity that it seeks to celebrate, ultimately putting at stake the willingness and ability of minority communities to fully participate in and contribute to a shared regional identity.

A more detail analysis of these practices linked to identities and communities is going to be led in the next section by zooming to the case study of Gorizia-Nova Gorica, that have been named for the European Capital of Culture 2025. A brief historical background will be provided before analysing the case study under the analytical lens of Practice theory.

5. The History of Gorizia and Nova Gorica

Gorizia and Nova Gorica offer a microcosmic view of the broader Upper Adriatic history. Originally part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Gorizia became a border town following World War I, when the territory was divided between Italy and

what would become Yugoslavia. After World War II, the city of Gorizia was split, with Nova Gorica being established on the Yugoslav side of the border. This division, symbolized by the so-called “Gorizia Wall,” mirrored the broader division of Europe during the Cold War (Porcelli 2022).

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of communism in Eastern Europe paved the way for new forms of cross-border interaction. The physical and ideological barriers that had divided Gorizia and Nova Gorica began to erode, especially after Slovenia’s independence and its accession to the EU. In 2004, the symbolic removal of the border at the Transalpina Square between Gorizia and Nova Gorica became a powerful symbol of European integration and the re-emergence of a shared regional identity (Porcelli 2022).

The candidacy of Gorizia and Nova Gorica as the European Capital of Culture for 2025 under the slogan “Go Borderless” epitomizes this new era of cross-border cooperation. The initiative aims to further integrate the two cities, fostering a shared cultural and economic space that transcends the historical divisions of the past. This project is seen as a culmination of decades of efforts to build a transborder identity and a testament to the resilience of cross-border communities in the face of geopolitical challenges (Porcelli 2022).

In general terms the cities of Gorizia in Italy and Nova Gorica in Slovenia have often been lauded at the EU level by the Directorate General of the Commission that focus on integration and cooperation as prime examples of the positive impact of European integration on cross-border cooperation. However, while European integration, particularly through frameworks like the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), has undoubtedly facilitated cooperation between these cities, it is essential to critically assess the depth and nature of this so-called “inclusive and interconnected regional identity.”

The notion of a “shared identity” emerging from European integration efforts, as often celebrated, raises important questions. What does it truly mean for a region to possess an “inclusive and interconnected regional identity,” especially in a cross-border context where historical, socio-political, and economic disparities are deeply entrenched? The narrative of a seamless transformation from divided cities into a cohesive cross-border region may oversimplify the complex realities on the ground.

The fieldwork lead for this research has shown that the formation and maintenance of cross-border regions like Gorizia-Nova Gorica are deeply influenced by everyday practices and the collaborative efforts of local communities (fieldwork conducted between 2021-2023). These practices, which are crucial for genuine integration, are not merely the result of top-down EU policies but emerge from the organic, often contested, interactions among local actors. The idea of an “inclusive and interconnected regional identity” must, therefore, be understood not as a monolithic or uniform outcome but as a dynamic

process shaped by ongoing negotiations, power struggles, and the lived experiences of the communities involved.

In examining the role of “communities of practice” within the context of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, it becomes evident that these communities are not merely natural byproducts of European integration policies. Rather, they are actively constructed and maintained through the routine interactions and shared practices of local actors, as indicated by fieldwork conducted from 2021 to 2023. These interactions form the foundation upon which collective identities are built and sustained, deeply embedded in the daily lives of those inhabiting these cross-border regions.

These communities of practice, comprising local leaders, civil servants, and community members, are heavily involved in ongoing collaborative efforts that extend beyond mere policy implementation. They participate in initiatives such as the EGTC-GO, which facilitates joint urban planning and cultural activities. This highlights how local actors play a crucial role in shaping cross-border cooperation through shared endeavors reflecting their collective aspirations and challenges (Wenger 1998; Adler & Pouliot 2011).

A crucial aspect of these cross-border interactions involves the active participation of ethnic minorities, notably the Slovenian minority in Italy and the Italian minority in Slovenia. As mentioned in the previous part, these communities have historically been key actors in cross-border cooperation, especially given their unique position straddling national boundaries. Their involvement is not only symbolic but also practical, as they navigate and negotiate their cultural and linguistic identities in a space that has historically been marked by division and conflict.

However, while these communities foster cooperation and contribute to the emergence of a shared regional identity, they also possess the potential to reinforce divisions (Paasi 1986). For instance, while the EGTC projects facilitated economic collaboration, they also highlighted disparities in development priorities—Italian Gorizia focused on preserving historical sites, while Slovenian Nova Gorica emphasized modern infrastructure and entertainment, like casinos. This divergence in focus reinforced existing economic and social divides between the two communities, demonstrating how cross-border initiatives can unintentionally solidify the very boundaries they seek to dissolve (interviews with the author 2021).

In this light, the transformation of Gorizia and Nova Gorica is not just a straightforward success story of Europeanization. It reflects the intricate and often conflicting processes through which cross-border cooperation is negotiated and enacted. The emerging regional identity is, therefore, less about an idyllic sense of belonging and more about the ongoing, pragmatic negotiations of coexistence within a space that remains marked by its history of division and its current socio-economic challenges.

This more nuanced understanding underscores the need to critically evaluate claims of “inclusive and interconnected” identities in cross-border regions. It suggests that true integration requires not just policy frameworks like the EGTC but also a deep engagement with the social and cultural practices that define everyday life in these regions. Only through such an approach can the complexities of cross-border integration be fully appreciated, moving beyond the overly optimistic narratives to address the real challenges and opportunities of creating cohesive regional spaces.

6. Conclusion

This research highlights that cross-border cooperation in the Upper Adriatic, while fostering significant socio-economic ties and reducing some historical animosities, has not fully achieved a seamless merging of regional identities. The region’s complex history, marked by shifting borders and diverse cultural influences, continues to influence the identities and interactions of its inhabitants. The cross-border initiatives, particularly those supported by EU programs like Interreg, have facilitated a more integrated landscape. However, the creation of a cohesive cross-border identity remains an ongoing and multifaceted process.

The findings suggest that rather than a unified regional identity, what has emerged is a hybrid identity where regional, national, and local affiliations coexist, sometimes harmoniously, but often with underlying tensions. This hybrid identity reflects both the successes and limitations of cross-border cooperation. While there is a growing sense of shared community, especially in institutional frameworks like the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), the persistence of socio-economic and cultural barriers indicates that the process of integration is far from complete.

The case of Gorizia-Nova Gorica exemplifies how intercultural citizenship can be operationalized in a cross-border context. The regular meetings and shared administration described in the EGTC-GO case study demonstrate how intercultural practices can transcend national borders, creating a unified region that, while politically divided, operates as a cohesive social and cultural entity. This case study illustrates Kymlicka’s (2017) argument that intercultural citizenship is essential for the success of cross-border regions, as it ensures that collaboration is not just a matter of policy but is rooted in the daily practices and identities of the people involved.

Moreover, the study underscores that the role of ethnic minorities and local communities is crucial in driving cross-border initiatives. These groups, through their daily practices and engagements, both shape and are shaped by the broader processes of European integration. However, their experiences also reveal the challenges of maintaining distinct cultural identities within a framework that seeks to promote a shared regional identity.

The article ultimately argues that the development of a cohesive and harmonious cross-border region in the Upper Adriatic is not just about overcoming physical borders, but also about addressing the deeper socio-cultural divides that continue to exist. The creation of a truly integrated region requires more than just policy frameworks; it necessitates a sustained effort to engage with and understand the lived experiences and identities of the people in these borderlands. This conclusion calls for a more critical and nuanced approach to European integration, one that recognizes the complexities and contradictions inherent in cross-border cooperation and identity formation.

To conclude, in answering the research question, the article concludes that while cross-border cooperation has indeed influenced regional identities and fostered community cohesion to some extent, it has also reinforced certain divisions and challenges. The path to a fully integrated cross-border identity in the Upper Adriatic is therefore one of gradual progress, requiring ongoing negotiation, adaptation, and commitment from all stakeholders involved.

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