

NAVIGATING IDENTITIES AND COMMUNITIES: INSIGHTS FROM THE EUROPEAN BORDERLANDS

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Abstract: As Europe contends with globalisation and regionalism, the evolving dynamics of identity and community within European integration are increasingly critical. This paper explores identity formation and community building at the EU's internal borders, grounded in Aristotelian political theory, particularly insights from "Politics" and "Nicomachean Ethics." It examines the 'polis' as essential for human flourishing and applies this classical framework to modern European border regions. The central research question is: How do European border regions balance local identities within broader networks, and what does this mean for European integration? Using case studies from the *b-solutions* compendium, the paper hypothesizes that local autonomy and cross-border cooperation enhance both identity preservation and community integration. These case studies highlight practical challenges and solutions in cross-border interactions, emphasizing the importance of harmonizing local and supranational interests. The article outlines Aristotelian philosophical foundations, analyses empirical data, and offers policy recommendations, linking theory with practical insights into Europe's borderlands.¹

Key words: b-solutions, cross-border cooperation, integration, Aristotle, identity

¹ The *b-solutions* initiative, implemented by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) on behalf of the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy since 2018, has analysed so far 165 legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border cooperation in the internal borders of the EU and those with the Pre-accession countries in a variety of fields. An expert in legal and cross-border aspects with knowledge of the respective languages is allocated to every selected case to elaborate a report describing the obstacle and its root causes and proposing possible solutions. The summaries of these reports are compiled in compendiums, three of which are already published, and the fourth is planned for September 2024. All *b-solutions* publications can be found in the project's online library: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/library>.

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long been committed to fostering integration as a path toward creating a unified, cohesive, and collaborative community among its member states. In this regard, the EU Cohesion Policy has served as an instrumental tool to foster European territorial cohesion and integration processes, for instance, by supporting European territorial cooperation (cross-border, transnational, and interregional) processes (EC 2024; Nadalutti, Rüländ 2024). Advocated as a model of community-building by Kleiner and Bücken (2024), the EU integration process entails the development of both a political and a socio-economic community. On the political front, EU citizens are endowed with rights including the freedom of movement and residence, non-discrimination, and eligibility to vote and stand in European Parliament and municipal elections. Socio-economically, the Union aspires to address ethical and social concerns through a governance model steeped in liberal norms and values (Wiener 2004; Schimmelfenning 2002).

These ideals underpin the creation of significant “superstructures” such as the Single Market, the Schengen Area, and the Euro, which collectively hold profound implications for the economic, political, and social life of EU citizens. Also, the Union is built on a community of values codified in the treaties. These principles include respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, and equality, as well as adherence to the rule of law and human rights. These values are commonly upheld by the Member States within a society characterised by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and gender equality (Chopin 2018).

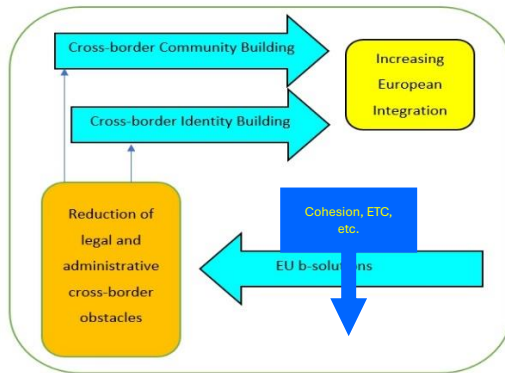
Building on this foundation, the concept of European identity emerges as linked to the community one. As the EU weaves together the diverse cultural, political, and economic threads of its member states, the idea of a collective identity begins to form, rooted in the shared values and rights that define the community (Bergbauer et al. 2018). This evolving identity is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and participation among EU citizens, reinforcing cooperation and, therefore, territorial integration via the reduction of all sorts of cross-border obstacles (Medeiros et al. 2022a).

Indeed, while collective identity and community of values are pivotal to the EU’s foundation for a greater integration that transcends the traditional boundaries of nation-states, it is still unclear how to conceptualise “identity”, “community” and “integration” in the EU. How and to what extent are these three elements interlinked? How far are we in achieving “greater integration” objectives within the EU?

Conceptually, the analysis emphasises the contribution of EU *b-solutions* as a policy tool aiming at reducing legal-administrative cross-border obstacles,

leading to increasing cross-border community building by facilitating cross-border commuting, institutional collaboration, and access to public services like healthcare, sports, and transportation, etc. (EC, 2022). Moreover, *b-solutions* can contribute to reinforcing cross-border identity building via its contribution to reducing cultural (mostly language) barriers and by reducing legal and administrative obstacles in the domain of education. As such, increasing cross-border community and identity building will contribute to increasing European integration (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The conceptual scheme of the research



Source: Own elaboration.

EU policies, then, such as Cohesion, make possible specific interventions like *b-solutions*, deepening knowledge for policymakers to make better and more informed decisions.

To address the proposed research concept, it is vital to try to conceptualize “identity”, “community” and “integration”. Theories of International Relations (IR) provide a variety of lenses through which to examine how and why they interlink or stay apart from one another and how they interact and shape the broader integration process.

Realism, focused on state sovereignty and national interest, views European integration as an instrumental tool to increase the power of member states in a competitive international context (Maher 2021). European identity, in this view, is fragile and conditioned by the alignment of national interests. Conversely, liberalism argues that European integration is a transformative process that fosters a shared identity and a deeper community (Risse 2010; Moravcsik 1995). European institutions, according to liberals, play a crucial role in shaping this identity, encouraging cooperation and promoting democratic values. Constructivism, finally, emphasizes the social and dynamic nature of European

identity, which is constructed through interactions, discourses, and institutional practices (Katzensteing 2006). In summary, while realism sees European identity as a contingent and instrumental product, liberalism and constructivism consider it a dynamic and multidimensional process, shaped by institutional, cultural, and social factors.

Pointing out these features, show that these theoretical perspectives collectively underscore the complexity of the EU's integration process. While realists caution against overestimating the strength of the EU's community and collective identity, liberalists and constructivists provide compelling arguments for how integration can foster a sense of belonging that transcends national boundaries.

The debates within these theories are not merely academic; they reflect the ongoing struggles within the EU itself. As the EU continues to evolve and face several economic, social, and health crises, it is evident whether the EU can sustain its integration project may well depend on its ability to cultivate a sense of shared identity and community that can withstand the centrifugal forces of nationalism, state sovereignty and crises (Schmidt 2009).

Hence, the European Union's efforts to cultivate a common European identity are fraught with challenges rooted in the complex and diverse historical experiences of its member states. This diversity is not merely cultural or linguistic but is deeply intertwined with national histories, memories, and identities that resist subsumption under a unified European narrative (Fossum 2003).

Indeed, the challenges of fostering a common European identity are further exacerbated when viewed through the lens of territorial integration, particularly in EU's cross-border regions through the lens of cross-border cooperation, which has been supported by EU funding since the early 1990s via the Interreg programmes (Medeiros, 2018). The EU's territorial integration policies aim to reduce disparities and promote cohesion among regions, yet the local realities within cross-border areas offer a distinct vantage point for analysing the complexities of European integration (Nadalutti 2015a). Cross-border zones, where different national identities and legal systems intersect, serve as laboratories for observing the practical implications of the EU's identity-building project (Guillermo-Ramirez 2018).

In these cross-border regions, the everyday interactions between citizens of different national backgrounds highlight the persistent cross-border barriers to a cohesive European identity. These are mostly of a legal-administrative nature but also take the form of accessibility, economic, sociocultural, environmental and institutional-related obstacles. While cross-border cooperation initiatives strive to enhance connectivity and mutual understanding, they often reveal the deep-seated attachments to national identities that challenge the EU's broader integrative ambitions (Nadalutti 2014; Guillermo-Ramirez 2018). These cross-border regions, therefore, become critical testing beds for examining how local actors

negotiate and reconcile their national identities with the supranational identity promoted by the EU.

Based on this, the research question at the heart of this analysis is: How do border regions in Europe negotiate their local identities within larger community networks, and what implications does this have for European integration? This study hypothesizes that greater local autonomy and cross-border cooperation enhance both identity preservation and community integration. It is suggested here that cross-border areas could theoretically serve as a microcosmos of European integration, where the dialectic between national and European identities is most pronounced and where the possibility of a transnational public sphere could be realized (Nadalutti 2015b). “Territorial integration” involves efforts to harmonize policy and governance across diverse territorial entities within the EU to ensure coherent development and seamless application of EU policies. However, the persistence of national public spheres and the uneven engagement of citizens in these border regions underscore the difficulties of transcending national identities in favour of a broader European consciousness and common good (Palermo 2012).

This study aims to dissect the interplay between local and European identities within the EU’s border regions, focusing on how these areas negotiate their identities within broader community networks through enhanced local autonomy and cross-border cooperation. This examination of cross-border cooperation typically employs traditional analytical frameworks, such as multi-level governance (Hooghe and Marks 2003; Nadalutti 2015) and network approaches (Svensson 2015), focusing on structural and procedural aspects. This paper introduces an alternative interpretative model based on Aristotelian political philosophy, as outlined in his seminal works, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. Aristotle’s perspectives are especially relevant to exploring themes of integration, cooperation, identity, and community formation within cross-border regions—envisioned here as contemporary ‘laboratories’ for governance and social interaction.

This analytical framework focuses on individuals as inherently social and not isolated entities, a notion that stands in contrast to modern individualistic paradigms. Aristotle asserts that personal identity is intricately linked to and shaped by communal ties, encapsulated in his assertion that “man is by nature a political animal” whose fullest potential is realised within a political community (*Politics* 1253a3). This concept suggests that personal and collective identities in cross-border regions are interdependent.

Moreover, Aristotle’s idea of the ‘common good’ is pivotal for re-envisioning cross-border cooperation. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he posits that the ultimate human good, or eudaimonia—commonly interpreted as ‘happiness’ or ‘flourishing’—is achieved through virtuous living in accordance with reason (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1097a30-1098a20). This pursuit of eudaimonia is not just

an individual endeavour but a communal one, requiring a societal framework that encourages ethical conduct and mutual respect. Hence, cross-border cooperation should aim not only at economic or security outcomes but also at fostering a collective sense of well-being and ethical community. This underscores the potential of cross-border regions as sites for nurturing new forms of community and shared identity, transcending established political and cultural divisions. At the same time it is important to keep in mind that cross-border cooperation may foster local transnational communities that emphasise historical ties rather than a broader European identity. These collaborations can reawaken older, pre-nation-state identities, which could challenge the EU's efforts to cultivate a unified European community.

The methodological framework of this analysis is underpinned by a comprehensive examination of the European Union's *b-solutions* initiative, specifically focusing on mapping case studies pertinent to enhancing cross-border commuting (Medeiros et al 2022b) and fostering the development of a shared regional identity. This detailed review is augmented by an extensive engagement with associated scholarly and practical resources, including the EU *b-solutions* compendium reports and academic research related to cross-border cooperation (CBC) and transnational commuting dynamics. Additionally, the study incorporates first-hand insights from experts and stakeholders directly engaged in the management of the *b-solutions* initiative, enriching the analysis with their specialised knowledge and practical experience.

In detail, this study investigates the practical challenges highlighted in the first *b-solutions*' compendium (AEBR & EC 2020) and looks into the second and third ones (AEBR & EC 2021, 2024) to confirm these challenges, exploring how cross-border interactions, from labour mobility to healthcare, navigate administrative and legal barriers, thereby contributing to community integration and identity preservation. Through this philosophical and empirical investigation, the study seeks to offer insights into the role of cross-border regions as pivotal spaces for fostering European solidarity and effective governance, aligning local particularities with supranational objectives and, thus, consolidating European integration from the bottom.

The article is organised as follows. First, it conceptualises "identity" and "community" linked to territorial integration. Then a state-of-the-art overview of "territorial integration" linked to cross-border activities is considered. After establishing a nuanced understanding of EU territorial integration in relation to identity and community, the relevance of Aristotelian politics is discussed. The analysis then examines various cases from the first compendium, noting that while many analyses focus on enhancing territorial integration, few delve into issues of 'identity' and 'community', and this is confirmed by the following

compendiums (2, 3, 4)². In the conclusion, the main findings of this analysis will be summarised.

2. Conceptualising “identity” and “community” within the “territorial integration”: a journey through philosophical thinking

Aristotle’s exploration of “identity” and “community” in both the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a foundational understanding of how individuals relate to the larger social and political structures in which they live. These concepts are central to his philosophy and are interwoven with his ideas on the nature of the state, the role of the individual within the community, and the pursuit of the good life.

In his foundational work *Politics*, Aristotle articulates the core purpose and structure of the state, positing that “every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good” (*Politics*, Book I, 1252a1-2). This notion of the “state” serves as a cornerstone in understanding political communities. If we briefly analyse Aristotle’s definition, it emerges that according to him the state *is* a community that forms with the aim of achieving some collective good. Aristotle suggests that the state exists not merely for living but for achieving a good life, emphasising the ethical and normative dimensions of political life. Hence, this classical definition underscores the “state’s” role in facilitating the well-being and moral development of its citizens (Lokwood 2006).

Expanding Aristotle’s conceptual framework to the realm of cross-border cooperation illuminates its relevance in modern contexts. Cross-border zones, characterised by overlapping sovereignties and shared governance, echo Aristotle’s vision by transcending traditional boundaries of statehood defined by physical and territorial limits (Perkmann and Sum 2002; Nadalutti 2024). In these areas, cooperation across borders is not just a matter of necessity. Still, it becomes a strategic endeavour to address shared challenges and leverage common opportunities, thereby fostering a collective pursuit of the “good life” across national boundaries (Nadalutti 2024) and then, in the Union as a whole.

Cross-border regions can be theorised as new forms of political communities that embody the Aristotelian pursuit of the common good beyond the confines of a singular, sovereign state. They are consolidated in many cross-border areas of the European Union, a supranational construction beyond the Westphalian governance model growingly trying to facilitate different forms of territorial

² In the second and third b-solutions compendiums, which analyze 47 and 41 cases respectively, the term “identity” is not explicitly mentioned except when it pertains to identification systems such as e-cards. The concept of “community” as discussed in this paper appears in a very superficial, informal way, primarily in relation to “energy communities.” While the intention to foster a “community” is implicit in many instances, the explicit treatment of “community” as conceptualized in the broader discussion of European integration is superficial.

cooperation (cross-border, transnational and interregional) to boost the cohesion of all territories.

In other continents, cross-border cooperation occurs in markedly different contexts, often relying on bilateral agreements between the involved nation-states rather than multilateral frameworks. These arrangements can be both stable and dynamic, frequently aligning with traditional cross-border communities or areas previously in dispute. Notably, there are genuine instances of cooperation in cross-border regions characterised by grassroots solid engagement and a mutual willingness to collaborate with neighbouring communities. This cooperation is often rooted in the “artificial boundaries” imposed by colonial powers, such as those established in Africa following the Berlin West African Conference of 1884-1885 (Asiwaju 1990).

Understanding the unique characteristics of each cross-border area is essential, as they require tailored approaches. However, certain aspects are common to all, whether the area in question is a cross-border metropolitan region with thousands of daily commuters or a peripheral or outermost territory grappling with demographic and other significant challenges. In any cross-border area where there is a basic commitment to community building, a “hybrid” governance structure can be implemented. This structure allows multiple states to share resources, policies, and responsibilities, thereby improving the welfare of the broader community. Euroregions, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, Eurocities, and many others, are concrete examples of ongoing cross-border governance structures (Medeiros 2018), some of them working for more than half a century for the benefit of border citizens. The theoretical framework for cross-border communities deconstructs the Westphalian conception of national boundaries and collides with the also Westphalian concept of national sovereignty. But it aligns with Aristotle’s vision of the “state” as an entity focused on achieving the highest moral and practical good for its people, though adapted to the complexities and interdependencies of the globalised world (Vaughan-Williams 2009).

Aristotle’s philosophy provides a foundational ethos for understanding and developing cross-border cooperation, suggesting that such cooperation could lead to realising a good life in a multi-state context, where the traditional notions of statehood are expanded and redefined. This approach not only revisits but also revitalises Aristotle’s ideas, placing them at the heart of contemporary debates about governance, sovereignty, and community in an increasingly interconnected world. It is particularly valuable today since it highlights the inherent goal of any community: to achieve a collective benefit.

It is argued here that cross-border cooperation can be codified as a modern political mechanism that echoes Aristotle’s vision by striving to create a supranational community focused on achieving greater collective good beyond the confines of national self-interest. This responds to the liberal vision of

integration according to the EU: European nations seek to collectively enhance economic stability, social cohesion, and political cooperation, elements that correspond to the ‘highest good’. Following this philosophical approach, it follows that within this “community”, the individual identity extends beyond personal characteristics, encompassing the roles and responsibilities held within a broader societal context.

Specifically, Aristotle emphasises the dynamic role of a citizen within the state, highlighting that participation in political life fundamentally shapes one’s identity. This participation is characterised by a cyclical power dynamic where individuals govern and are governed in turn, underscoring the notion that identity is forged through engagement with the community’s political and social structures (*Politics*, Book III, 1277b14-15).

Indeed, EU’s cross-border regions exemplify Aristotle’s principle that the individual’s identity is significantly shaped by their societal roles. Thus, in the context of European integration, Aristotle’s insights into the formation of identity through communal roles provide a valuable lens through which to view the transformative impact of cross-border cooperation. As individuals participate in and contribute to the collective endeavours of their communities, they not only shape but are also shaped by the evolving European identity, reinforcing the interconnectedness of personal involvement and regional well-being.

Aristotle delves deeper into the notion of identity in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he connects it intimately with the concept of virtue. He posits that virtues are not inherent traits but are dispositions developed through consistent practice, enabling individuals to perform their roles within the community effectively. In *Ethics* Book II, Aristotle elucidates that virtues are cultivated habits, integral to achieving eudaimonia, or true human flourishing, which he defines as a high form of happiness achieved through virtuous activity (*Ethics*, Book II, 1103a15-25). This flourishing, according to Aristotle, is not an isolated pursuit but one deeply embedded within the societal framework. It necessitates a contribution to the communal good, which in turn allows individuals to realise their fullest potential.

Applied to cross-border cooperation, integration efforts aim to transcend traditional national boundaries and foster a shared sense of purpose among diverse European populations. Cross-border regions serve as vital platforms where citizens from different nations collaborate on common projects—from economic initiatives to environmental conservation and cultural exchanges, or the provision of public services.

In this context, the virtues that Aristotle discusses—such as justice, prudence, and fortitude—become crucial for individuals participating in these cross-border activities. These virtues enable individuals to navigate the complexities of multi-national cooperation effectively. As people engage in and contribute to the collective endeavours of their cross-border communities, they not only advance their personal development but also contribute to the overarching goal of

European integration: a harmoniously integrated continent where collective well-being is enhanced by each individual's growth and virtue.

Finally, Aristotle's philosophy offers a nuanced understanding of how different forms of governance shape identities within a community. In *Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes between different kinds of rule and the corresponding identities they produce. For example, within the household, Aristotle contrasts the despotic rule of the master over the slave with the more cooperative and shared roles between husband and wife. This distinction is not merely about power dynamics but also about how these roles shape the identities of those involved. The master-slave relationship creates a hierarchical identity where the master embodies authority and control, while the slave's identity is shaped by subordination and utility (*Politics*, Book I, 1255b16-20).

In contrast, when Aristotle discusses the relationship between citizens within a state, he shifts to a model of constitutional rule, where individuals take on roles that involve both ruling and being ruled. This form of governance emphasises equality and shared responsibility, where the individual's identity is closely linked to their participation in the political process (*Politics*, Book III, 1279a20-25). This is particularly significant in the context of the European Union, where integration efforts aim to balance the diverse identities of member states within a unified political and socio-economic framework.

In our view, in cross-border regions, the balance between local autonomy and participation in the broader EU governance structure should mirror Aristotle's concept of constitutional rule, where citizens are both rulers and subjects. The EU's efforts to promote cross-border cooperation and reduce disparities through territorial integration can be seen as a modern application of Aristotle's ideas, where the goal is to create a cohesive community that supports both individual and collective identities.

To conclude this part, by applying Aristotle's distinction between different kinds of rule to the EU context, we can better understand the challenges and opportunities of fostering a European identity that complements, rather than overrides, local and national identities. This perspective highlights the importance of governance structures that promote participation, equality, and shared responsibility, all of which are essential for the successful integration and cohesion of the EU as a political community.

Empirically, this study will focus on a few practical implications of cross-border cooperation as exemplified by the numerous cases analysed within the *b-solutions* initiative and the compendiums published so far. These cases, such as those submitted by the cross-border hospital in Cerdanya, at the Spanish-French border, and the "Ambulances without Borders" initiative between Belgium and the Netherlands, provide concrete examples of how cross-border regions navigate complex identity and community dynamics within the broader EU framework. By analysing these cases, this study explores how local identities are preserved and

enhanced through cross-border collaboration, and how these initiatives contribute to the broader goal of European integration. This approach will provide a realistic assessment of the potential and limitations of cross-border cooperation in fostering both community integration and the preservation of local identities, without overpromising what can be achieved.

3. Navigating European Integration: Empirical Insights from b-solutions on Identity and Community Dynamics in Border Regions

This section focuses on the EU *b-solutions* initiative to explore whether these activities contribute to identity and community building as envisaged by the EU. As we have seen in the previous section, it is highly problematic to speak about a determined, fixed “EU identity” (Bee 2008; Mayer et al. 2004). It is argued that European identity is profoundly shaped by the European Union’s institutional frameworks and integration strategies. Mayer et al. (2004) emphasise that European identity is complex and multifaceted, emerging significantly through the EU’s legal and institutional frameworks rather than from a shared historical or cultural past. This understanding of EU identity can of course be debated, contested or agreed (Lähdesmäki 2019).

What’s crucial to note here is that this identity is primarily defined by common citizenship rights and the reinforcement of supranational structures, underscoring the institutional construction of identity within the EU context. This approach is vital in understanding the practical implications of the EU’s efforts to foster regional cooperation and address cross-border challenges, which are key aspects of the *b-solutions* initiative.

Bee (2008) further explores this by examining the deliberate construction of European identity by the European Commission, particularly through policies that enhance education, culture, and public communication. This strategic construction is aimed at reinforcing political participation within a multi-level governance framework, illustrating the EU’s intent to integrate diverse populations effectively. Bee’s insights are particularly relevant to the EU’s *b-solutions* initiative, which aims to resolve administrative and legal obstacles to cooperation across EU internal borders. By promoting a sense of belonging and shared identity, this initiative not only addresses practical cross-border issues but also reinforces a collective European identity that supports broader integration and cohesion goals.

In order to show this, the present section focuses on two specific cases from the *b-solutions* first compendium (2020): the cross-border Cerdanya Hospital between Spain and France, and the “Ambulances without Borders” project between Belgium and the Netherlands. These cases were chosen for their practical significance and their capacity to provide insights into the complex interplay between local identities and broader European integration efforts (Berzi 2017; Buiskool et al. 2021).

On one side, the Cerdanya Hospital project represents quite a unique and successful cross-border collaboration in the healthcare sector. In this area, the intersection of different national systems poses significant challenges to integration. This case is particularly relevant for examining how administrative, legal, and cultural barriers can be navigated to create a shared identity and community that transcends national borders. The hospital serves as a microcosm of broader European integration, demonstrating how cooperative efforts can preserve and enhance local and national identities.

On the other hand, the “Ambulances without Borders” initiative provides a compelling example of how cross-border cooperation can directly impact community cohesion in emergency situations. The ability of this initiative to overcome jurisdictional and procedural differences between Belgium and the Netherlands highlights the potential for cross-border efforts to foster a stronger, more resilient sense of community in regions where borders might otherwise impede cooperation.

These case studies are not selected merely for their success in overcoming technical or administrative obstacles but for their ability to reveal cross-border cooperation’s deeper social and cultural impacts. By focusing on these examples, this empirical section aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how cross-border initiatives contribute to identity preservation and community building, offering valuable lessons for other regions within the EU facing similar challenges. Finally, these case studies are selected because they allow us to explore how the b-solutions initiative may intersect with community and identity issues within the context of European integration. This study is pioneering in its approach, as previous analyses of the b-solutions initiative have not delved into these social and cultural dimensions. The challenges of integrating local identities within broader European frameworks are complex, and these cases offer unique insights into how cross-border cooperation can both shape and reflect these dynamics. Due to space constraints, we only begin this exploration here, intending to provide a foundation for more detailed and comparative studies in the future.

4. Insights from the cross-border Cerdanya Hospital

The Cerdanya Valley, with its unique geographical positioning straddling the border between France and Spain, serves as a significant case study for cross-border cooperation. The valley itself, about 200 km² in size, is surrounded by mountains and has historically been a single region, despite its bifurcation into two national entities due to political boundaries established by the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659. The demographic distribution in the valley is uneven, with a greater population density on the Spanish side compared to the French one.

Berzi’s analysis points out that the Cerdanya Hospital is a core element of the health cooperation initiative, underpinning much of the cross-border interaction in the region (2013, 2017). This hospital was specifically designed to serve the

cross-border population and is the first in Europe directly conceived for a transboundary context to look after patients and hire staff from both sides of the border. European Union funding mechanisms facilitated this project, and after trying several legal instruments, the legal framework provided by the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) was revealed as the most suitable option, allowing for smoother cooperation and governance across the border (Sanjuan 2013).

The hospital itself is not only a health facility but also a symbol of integration and cooperation. It addresses numerous usual challenges for cross-border cooperation, such as legal discrepancies, administrative overlapping, language barriers, and the lack of coordination for operational protocols in case of emergency. By providing shared services, the hospital helps reduce the ‘mental and physical borders’ between populations separated by national boundaries. The operational success of the hospital has been significant, providing an essential service to a population that would otherwise face considerable challenges in accessing healthcare. The facility operates under a binational management system, with staff and administrative protocols designed to seamlessly accommodate the needs of French and Spanish patients.

Berzi (2017) highlights that the success of the Cerdanya Hospital reflects broader cross-border cooperation themes, where local specifics—such as the homogeneity of the region in terms of culture and historical ties—play a crucial role in the success of these initiatives. The project leverages both the EU’s structural support and the unique local characteristics to foster a more integrated European identity at the regional level, making it an exemplary case of how territorial cooperation can effectively bridge the divides created by national borders³.

Through Berzi’s comprehensive examination, the Cerdanya case reveals the potential of cross-border projects to enhance regional development and integration, demonstrating the tangible benefits of cooperative approaches in the European Union’s framework for regional policy and cohesion. The detailed analysis of this case study not only provides insights into the complexities of implementing cross-border public services but also illustrates the broader implications for regional policy and cooperation in the EU.

Building upon the detailed description of the Cerdanya Hospital as presented in Berzi’s analysis, we now turn to its broader implications within the European integration context, particularly through the theoretical lens provided by the Aristotelian concept of ‘polis’—a community aimed at achieving the common good. This theoretical perspective enriches our understanding of how cross-

³ European founding fathers and AEBR pioneers frequently used the term “scars of History” to refer to the borders but also the divides created between the populations in both sides after centuries of war.

border cooperation, exemplified by the Cerdanya Hospital, not only serves immediate healthcare needs but also fosters broader social and political integration.

Aristotle's notion of the 'polis' is premised on the idea that the highest form of community is one that enables its members to achieve their fullest potential and live a good life. In the context of the Cerdanya Hospital, this translates into a cooperative endeavour that transcends traditional sovereign boundaries to create a unified health service area that serves both Spanish and French populations equally. The hospital acts as a microcosm of the larger EU ethos of integration, where diverse communities find common ground in shared services and mutual benefits, thus embodying Aristotle's concept of achieving common good.

Furthermore, Aristotle's idea of 'koinonia' or partnership is vividly reflected in the operational structure of the Cerdanya Hospital. The hospital is a result of collaborative efforts between two different national health systems, aimed at optimising resources and expertise across borders to provide high-quality medical care. This partnership extends beyond mere administrative cooperation; it fosters a sense of community among the residents of the Cerdanya Valley, who see the hospital not just as a medical facility but as a symbol of unity and shared identity.

Traditional planning would have led to a small regional hospital on the Spanish side in Catalonia and no hospital at all in a very wide but sparsely populated territory on the French side due to the lack of critical mass (the minimum population needed to build a hospital, a very expensive and complex facility). However, considering this territory and its population in its cross-border dimension, just one critical mass analysis was necessary to plan a single (cross-border) hospital. The theoretical design was impeccable, but the practical implementation was very difficult. To give an example, the hospital is included in the Spanish healthcare system, which is decentralised, and in this case, the competent authority is *CatSalut*, the Catalan Health Service, under the *Generalitat de Catalunya*. In France the provision of healthcare is a national responsibility with regional representations. This asymmetry made it very difficult to navigate a complex set of institutions and regulations. However, finally, mutual interest and trust, lots of actions by local stakeholders and partners, great doses of political will and an appropriate European framework bore fruit (Martín Guillermo Ramirez, secretary of the AEBR).

This process and the integration achieved at a community level also address the research question of this article regarding how border regions in Europe negotiate their local identities within larger community networks and the implications of these negotiations for European integration. The Cerdanya Hospital demonstrates that local autonomy and cross-border cooperation can coexist harmoniously, with each enhancing the other. This cross-border service, celebrating ten years of operation in 2024, allows for the preservation of local identities—where communities maintain their unique cultural and linguistic

characteristics—while also integrating these identities into a broader European framework. This dual approach enhances community integration by building trust and interdependence among border populations also between public authorities), thus strengthening the overall process of European integration.

In conclusion, the various cases submitted by the Cerdanya Hospital to the *b-solutions* initiative have highlighted major gaps within the EU integration vision that we can summarise as follows: lack of recognition of professional qualifications and the difficulties of hiring across the border, but also some challenges related to the exchange of personal data and the need to share medical records in cross-border contexts. The research conducted by Berci (2017), and the analysis by Peyrony (2020), along with various other studies on cross-border healthcare, collectively illustrate how theoretical concepts of community and cooperation can be effectively applied to modern challenges. These studies show that cross-border healthcare cooperation not only addresses specific local needs but also promotes broader goals such as social cohesion and political integration within the EU. Projects like the Cerdanya Hospital exemplify how fostering a shared European identity and highlighting the tangible benefits of integration contribute to a deeper understanding of European unity, aligning with Aristotelian principles of community life and the pursuit of the common good.

5. An insight from the “Ambulances without Borders”

The case study “Ambulances without Borders” offers a compelling examination of how cross-border cooperation can fundamentally improve emergency medical services (EMS) in border regions, specifically between Belgium and the Netherlands. This initiative responds to the unique challenges that arise in areas where national boundaries can impede timely and efficient emergency responses. At its core, the problem this initiative addresses is the operational inefficiency in EMS caused by discrepancies in administrative, legal, and language protocols across borders (AEBR & EC 2020).

The initiative was conceptualised to ensure that when emergencies occur near or at the border, response times and patient care are not compromised by the jurisdictional boundaries. Normally, differences in EMS protocols can lead to significant delays in dispatching ambulances, sharing critical patient information and (again) in the recognition of medical qualifications of personnel who may cross the border while providing care (physicians, nurses, ambulance drivers) or the authorisation of the vehicle and its content (medical equipment, including drugs). By harmonizing these protocols through extensive negotiations and legal agreements, “Ambulances without Borders” has made significant strides in reducing cross-border barriers, particularly at the Belgian-Dutch border. However, challenges remain for ambulances and healthcare personnel attempting to cross many other internal EU borders. This is evident from other cases documented by the AEBR and EC, such as those at the Belgian-French border

(AEBR & EC 2020) and the Croatian-Romanian and Croatian-Serbian borders (AEBR & EC 2024). These examples highlight that while progress has been made, there are still considerable obstacles to overcome in ensuring seamless cross-border healthcare within the EU.

A key component of this initiative was the integration of communication technologies to enable real-time coordination between various Emergency Medical Services (EMS) teams operating across the border. This need for integration is underscored by the well-documented incident of a large industrial fire in Enschede, the Netherlands, which occurred prior to the widespread adoption of mobile phones and the Internet. During that event, a German fire brigade was delayed in responding because they were unaware of the radio frequencies used by their Dutch counterparts. This situation highlights the critical importance of technological interoperability, which ensures that EMS units on both sides of the border are familiar with each other's protocols, can effortlessly share essential information—including patient data—and coordinate more effectively during emergencies. Furthermore, a significant accomplishment of this initiative is the mutual recognition of medical qualifications and EMS protocols between the two countries, a recurring challenge in cross-border collaborations. This achievement facilitates smoother operations and enhances the mobility of medical personnel, thereby improving the overall efficiency of emergency response efforts.

The collaboration brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including health authorities, emergency service professionals, legal experts, and policymakers from both Belgium and the Netherlands and at different levels of governance. Their efforts were crucial in overcoming the legal and logistical challenges that previously hampered effective cross-border cooperation in emergency medical services.

From a theoretical standpoint, this initiative serves as a tangible embodiment of Aristotle's conception of the 'polis'—understood not merely as a city-state but as a political community oriented toward the common good. As we have investigated in the theoretical section, in Aristotle's philosophy, the 'political' extends beyond the realm of governance and law to encompass the collective well-being of the people, or the *polis*. Here, the initiative exemplifies this broader notion of the political by fostering cooperation between communities across national borders, thereby transcending geographic and administrative limitations. This cooperation, aimed at enhancing public health and safety, reflects the Aristotelian ideal that the true purpose of a political community is to cultivate the conditions for the common good. In this context, the common good is realized through improved cross-border emergency response, ensuring that health and security are safeguarded not just within, but between, nations. This philosophical framework underscores the importance of intercommunal collaboration as essential to achieving the greater collective goods that benefit all members of the

polis. In modern terms, the “Ambulances without Borders” initiative can be seen as a manifestation of this Aristotelian ideal, where the health and well-being of individuals in border regions are prioritised over the constraints imposed by national boundaries. This case study also aligns with broader European Union strategies aimed at fostering greater integration and cooperation among member states, particularly in terms of public health and emergency services.

This practical application of cross-border cooperation not only provides immediate benefits in terms of patient outcomes but also fosters a sense of shared identity and mutual reliance among the communities and professionals involved. It creates a blueprint for similar initiatives that could enhance regional stability and unity, showcasing how deep integration can be achieved in critical areas like emergency medical services within the EU framework. Overall, “Ambulances without Borders” serves as a vital case study in understanding how theoretical principles of community and common good can be practically applied to modern challenges, particularly in densely interconnected regions like the EU. This initiative exemplifies how collaborative efforts and strategic integration can overcome substantial barriers, ultimately enhancing both the immediate and long-term well-being of border communities.

To conclude, these collaborations, including health services and emergency responses across borders, directly contribute to the well-being of the citizens by ensuring that essential services are accessible and effective across national boundaries. Moreover, this interaction not only aids in the immediate improvement of services but also in the building of a communal identity that transcends traditional national divides, encouraging a broader, more inclusive understanding of community that aligns with Aristotle’s vision of a polis aimed at achieving the common good. This kind of engagement demands that individuals and institutions embody virtues such as cooperation and fairness, crucial for the sustained well-being and ethical development of societies living in border regions

6. Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive examination of how local and European identities intersect and evolve within the EU’s border regions, with a particular focus on the role of cross-border cooperation and local autonomy in this process. Grounded in Aristotelian political philosophy, the study provides a theoretical framework that enriches the empirical analysis of the “b-solutions Compendium of 43 Cases.”

The empirical evidence from case studies such as the Cerdanya Hospital and “Ambulances without Borders” underscores the tangible benefits of cross-border cooperation in fostering community integration and identity preservation. The Cerdanya Hospital, for example, exemplifies how cross-border health services can overcome national barriers, providing not just critical medical care but also

serving as a symbol of shared identity and community. This project demonstrates how local specificities—such as cultural homogeneity and historical ties—can be leveraged to enhance regional integration within the broader European framework.

Similarly, the “Ambulances without Borders” initiative highlights the practical benefits of harmonising emergency services across national borders, reducing response times and improving patient outcomes. This initiative illustrates how cross-border cooperation can address real-life challenges in border regions, effectively reducing the administrative and legal hurdles that often fragment these communities. The application of Aristotelian concepts such as ‘polis’ (political community) and ‘koinonia’ (partnership) in these case studies reveals how border regions can function not as peripheries but as central actors in the practice of European governance and solidarity. The study argues that these regions, through increased local autonomy and collaborative cross-border efforts, can play a pivotal role in advancing the EU’s broader integration goals.

Aristotle’s exploration of identity and community illuminates a deeply interdependent relationship, where community acts as both the setting and the catalyst for individual development. He posits that humans, as “political animals,” are inherently inclined to form communities, which not only ensure survival but also enhance the quality of life by providing opportunities for living well (*Politics*, Book I, 1253a1-2). This community framework allows individuals to cultivate and exercise virtues, essential for their role in contributing to the collective goals of the community. Thus, individual identity is significantly shaped by one’s engagement and function within the community, reinforcing the idea that personal and communal flourishing are inextricably linked.

In the framework of the European Union, cross-border cooperation is pivotal, not only in trying to harmonise economic and regulatory policies but also in fostering a shared European identity among citizens from diverse national backgrounds. This cooperation occurs in regions where borders historically separated communities, but now serve as links that connect people, facilitating shared initiatives in areas like trade, environmental protection, and public health. Policy-wise, the findings suggest that the EU should focus on developing border policies that are both flexible and responsive to the unique needs of border communities. Harmonizing regulations and administrative procedures across borders is crucial to reducing the friction that impedes cross-border interactions, thereby fostering a more cohesive European identity that respects both local particularities and supranational aspirations.

In conclusion, this study aimed to contribute to the understanding of European integration by illustrating how cross-border regions, through localised governance and cross-border cooperation, can enhance both local identity preservation and broader community integration. However, the enhancement of specific regional alliances may also lead to the exclusion of other identities,

reinforcing old divides and rekindling historical tensions, particularly in areas with complex pasts. These findings provide actionable insights for policymakers seeking to strengthen the fabric of European unity, demonstrating that effective governance in border regions is essential to the success of the EU's integrative efforts. By focusing on the alignment of local and supranational objectives, the EU can ensure that its border regions remain vital spaces for cultural exchange, cooperation, and the broader project of European solidarity.

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