

Cities in Transition: a Practical Approach to Understanding and Conceptualizing Cross-Border Cooperation in Gorizia-Nova Gorica

Elisabetta Nadalutti
FORWARD COLLEGE

Abstract

This paper explores cross-border cooperation (CBC) through the lens of Practice Theory, focusing on the case study of Gorizia-Nova Gorica on the Italian-Slovenian border. The central question is: what makes cross-border regional spaces emerge and hang together? The study argues that traditional economic evaluations overlook the complex socio-cultural interactions that are crucial for genuine integration. By emphasizing 'communities of practice', the research highlights how shared practices and collective identities shape cross-border regions. The originality of this research lies in adopting a humanistic practice approach, providing a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between socio-cultural and economic factors in EU integration efforts, especially under contemporary socio-political crises. The main findings indicate that the formation and maintenance of these regions are deeply influenced by everyday practices and the collaborative efforts of local communities, suggesting pathways for enhancing integration through cultural and social engagement alongside economic strategies.

1. Introduction

Geographers have pioneered investigations into cross-border cooperation (CBC) in cross-border regions (CBRs) (van Houtum, 2000; Paasi, 1986). However, the last twenty years have seen a significant intensification of analyses focusing on cross-border region building, and CBC activities linked to security issues. These topics have become increasingly prominent within the disciplines of European integration and, more recently, International Relations (Song, Sun, Liu, 2022; Nadalutti, Rüländ, 2024). While geographers focus more on how spaces are politically and economically structured, and the impacts of these structures on societal relations and policies (Plangger, 2019; Jessop, 2016; van Houtum, 2000), political scientists focus on governance, sovereignty and security, along with identity shaping and changing (Nadalutti, 2020; Böhm, 2023).

CBRs are conceptualized as socio-territorial zones along borders where socio-economic, ethnic, and territorial agents – both private and public – from two or more neighbouring countries operate due to the inherently connected character of these areas. Despite their proximity, the extent of interaction between these zones can vary significantly – from active collaboration to minimal contact – depending on the prevailing border dynamics (author's reformulation of Perkmann and Sum, 2002).

The regional policy department of the European Commission DGXVI, and now the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), which is currently



responsible for CBC issues within the EU, understands CBC through a liberalist lens. Hence, CBC actions are a set of activities where cross-border actors, as dynamic agents, work together to address collective and common problems thereby facilitating cooperation and integration for the common good. The main aim of CBC is to strengthen economic, social, and territorial cohesion by improving regional environments, encouraging economic growth, and reducing socio-economic disparities between regions. This includes managing the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programme, also known as Interreg, which is dedicated to fostering cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation (CoR, 2021).

Today, it is common to refer to cross-border regions as ‘laboratories’ where EU integration strategies and the processes of building European identity are tested. (Nadalutti, 2012; Palermo, 2012; EU Commission, 2021). Though the concept of ‘laboratories’ will be better explained in this analysis, it is worth remembering here that the Oxford Dictionary defines a laboratory as a ‘site or centre of development, production, or experimentation’. Hence, it is justifiable to argue that ‘cross-border regions’ are spaces where socio-economic and political cross-border practices and experiences are critically evaluated. This evaluation aims to cultivate specialized knowledge (European Commission, 2021) regarding effective and ineffective practices, which can be adapted to other governmental and non-governmental levels to enhance integration.

Yet, these testing grounds for European cohesion do not simply materialize without context: they are the product of concerted efforts and historical developments. That is why this article aims to address one fundamental question: ‘*What makes cross-border regional spaces emerge and hang together?*’ This is a relevant question to ask when socio-economic and political territorial integration is considered. This study is particularly relevant nowadays when social, economic and political crises (migration, pandemics, the euro and the Schengen regime crises, and the rise of populist movements hostile to European integration) are putting at stake the EU integration process (Böhm, 2021).

That is why it is crucial to study the role played by ‘communities of practice’ (CoP), understood as groups of people who share a common interest and are engaged in collective practices that can be renegotiated by its members (Wenger, 1998). As will be clarified in the theoretical section, this is not purely a ‘people approach’ (van Houtum, 2000) to CBRs and CBC, which considers human agency as shaping the spatial and social landscapes, underscoring borders as processes that continually define and redefine identities and spaces.

The ‘community of practice’ approach shifts the focus from individual and social identity dynamics to the *routine practices and everyday experiences that constitute and sustain the functions of communities*, including those that cross borders. Hence, there is a foundational difference between these two distinct, although overlapping, analytical perspectives. The CoP approach foregrounds the systematic practices over individual and social identity dynamics, providing a structured method to analyse how these practices contribute to the cohesion and functionality of cross-border regions. Thus, while van Houtum’s framework (2000) delineates borders as dynamic constructs continually reshaped by individual interactions, the CoP approach focuses on the recurrent and collective activities that stabilize and define the boundaries of cross-border communities over time.

This study operationalizes the theoretical framework along the Italian-Slovenian border, specifically focusing on the interlinked cities of Gorizia and Nova Gorica. It aims to unpack the complex socio-political interactions and the role of everyday practices in shaping the cross-border region, highlighting how these practices contribute to regional cohesion and community development. The selection of Gorizia and Nova Gorica extends beyond historical interest: as European Capital of Culture for 2025, these cities exemplify the potential for cultural and socio-economic revival through European integration. This case uniquely mirrors the Cold War divisions akin to Berlin, providing critical insights into the dynamics of reconciliation and co-development in border regions within the EU. Finally, acknowledging that the Gorizia-Nova Gorica border presents a limited sample, this article prioritises theoretical innovation over empirical breadth, employing socio-cultural practices to critically reframe CBC, thus broadening the analytical lens applied to these phenomena.

The study begins by introducing the methodological framework used. It will then critically evaluate the EU's concept of territorial 'integration' linked to cross-border activities, questioning the practical implications of such policies for border regions. It thus introduces Practice Theory and the idea of Community of Practices as tools to further dissect the operationalization of these EU policies within the specific case study. The subsequent section provides an in-depth historical exploration of the designated cross-border area, meticulously tracing its evolution and explicitly connecting its development to the overarching narrative of European Union (EU) integration. The article advances by summarizing these findings, delineating the complex and often contradictory outcomes of EU integration efforts in the borderlands.

2. Case study approach, data and methods

The methodology adopted for this study employs a qualitative research approach (Yin, 2009). Although a historical overview of the territory is provided from the end of World War II, and CBC activities are delineated from 2007 – when territorial cooperation became an objective of the European Union – the analysis specifically considers the relations between Gorizia and Nova Gorica from 2011 onwards, when the EGTC-GO was founded.

Empirical data for this research was collected through an analysis of border and cross-border regional activities, including newspaper articles. An extensive review was conducted of official EU, national, and regional planning reports and policy documents. These documents were selected for their relevance in elucidating several CBC aspects: the principles that underpin CBC activities; the rationale behind considering CBRs as laboratories for EU integration; the objectives of such cooperation; the roles played by cross-border communities; the identities and actions of these communities, and the type of integration being pursued.

In parallel to the examination of primary sources, twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of institutional actors. These included politicians, socio-economic representatives from cross-border cities, private entities, cross-border agencies, and regional development agency representatives at the European level (DGs Commissioners, CoR representatives), national level (Italian and Slovenian administrative staff engaged in CBC), and regional/communal level (Italian and Slovenian mayors,

GECT-GO administrative staff), as well as ambassadors and CBC stakeholders engaged on other European borders. The interviews were subjected to critical discourse analysis, which aimed to isolate social practices that shape ideas, values, and norms (Caldas-Coulthard et al. 2003) within CBRs.

The selection of actors to be interviewed was based on a two-step procedure. First, actors were 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. I participated in several conferences held on the Gorizia-Nova Gorica border leading up to their tenure as the 2025 European Capitals of Culture. A second set of interviews was conducted following a snowball sampling technique. At the end of each interview, actors were 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 requested to elaborate on the conceptualization of 'cross-border cities', 'border community', 'border identity', 'community', and practices and experiences that can help to integrate the territory. I invited my interviewees to discuss joint activities developed in cross-border cities, the planning vision of the cross-border zone, the long-term vision of the socio-economic, political, and territorial development of these zones, the obstacles encountered, and their understanding of European and national integration values.

3. From Lockean Liberalism to Normative Practice: a Theoretical Debate on CBC

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) involves collaboration between local government and non-government organizations situated near national borders to implement initiatives that cross these boundaries (Nadalutti and Rüland, 2024). Cross-border regions, the places where CBC occurs, are seen as micro-level political laboratories where national and supranational policy arenas intersect, fostering transnational governance (Knippenberg, 2004; Blatter, 2003; Nadalutti, 2022).

These regions exemplify European Union strategies in institution-building and policy cooperation (Hall, 2008). Central to this endeavour, CBC is designed to strengthen partnerships and spearhead joint projects among EU states through two strategies. Firstly, the enhancement of CBC is firmly rooted in experiential learning. The analysis of the EU document (2017) 'Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions' is a clear example of this strategy. It underscores a Lockean liberal emphasis on drawing from practical experiences to confront persistent challenges such as mobility, healthcare, and emergency services coordination, aiming to transcend mere economic growth towards fostering comprehensive socio-administrative cohesion. Secondly, linked to the initial strategy, is the deepening of ties through fostering a shared cultural and social identity, celebrating common historical roots (Nadalutti, 2024). I suggest here that both strategies are grounded in two principal concepts that are interlinked to one another: experiential learning and the practice-as-experience approach.

Building on the principles outlined, the practical implementation of EU CBC exemplifies the dynamic interaction between local initiatives and overarching EU strategies. This relationship underscores a practice-as-experience approach, where local agents – including regional governments and NGOs – play pivotal roles in interpreting and

applying EU policies to meet the specific challenges of border communities. These local experiences not only respond to EU strategies but also shape them. Influential bodies like the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), through initiatives such as resolutions, are instrumental in this process, advocating for changes that reflect ground realities in EU policymaking. This interplay aligns with John Locke's distinction between simple and complex ideas: simple ideas emerge from the everyday experiences of border residents, while complex ideas involve broader strategies like the Interreg programmes, which aim to enhance regional integration. Thus, the Lockean framework illuminates how local practices inform and influence broader EU policy directions, fostering a more holistic approach to governance that is sensitive to the nuances of local contexts.

To better capture the dynamic interplay between human behaviour and societal structures, the necessity is suggested here to pivot towards a 'Practice Theory' oriented approach. This strategic shift allows us to more deeply explore the activities and role of 'cross-border communities' to foster substantial, non-material connections in CBRs. Practice Theory enhances our understanding by emphasizing the significance of everyday activities and social practices as the bedrock for developing a unique, specific cross-border space. Focusing on the habitual and often overlooked practices of individuals and communities offers a pathway to a more holistic grasp of societal wellbeing. This approach not only aligns with but also enriches the EU's overarching goals of fostering a more cohesive, inclusive, and resilient European community.

Whereas the Lockean framework primarily accentuates individual experiences as sources of knowledge, Practice Theory brings to the forefront the collective and iterative nature of these experiences within social contexts. It underscores how practices are not merely repeated actions but are embedded in a fabric of cultural and historical significance, thereby shaping and being shaped by the societal structures. As stated by an interviewee, "Thus, even if investments are made across the border, the socio-economic repercussions are felt by 'our' fellow citizens. In cooperation, the impact on the border cannot be avoided! It benefits the 'border population'. However, with a nationalist perspective, one fails to see what lies beyond" (interview, 10 July, 2024). Clearly, the 'effects' here are the outcome of these evolving practices, where CBC leads to tangible impacts on the community through altering social and economic routines. In this light, Practice Theory provides a more robust framework for understanding and integrating the nuanced realities of cross-border interactions, which are crucial for effective EU integration strategies.

In subsequent sections, I will delve into a comprehensive view of Practice Theory and the Community of Practice, detailing how these frameworks can profoundly inform European territorial integration strategies. Before this, however, a brief overview of the state of the art in cross-border processes and principles that underpin CBC agreements will be provided to set the stage for discussion.

4. State of the art of cross-border bordering/debordering processes: a theoretical analysis

Cross-border cooperation within the European Union, rooted in principles such as subsidiarity (Article 5, 3 TEU), proportionality (Article 5, 4 TEU), and partnership,

significantly promotes harmonious regional integration and effective governance. The principle of subsidiarity ensures that decisions are made closely with the affected citizenry, aligning actions directly with objectives to foster local economic, social and political empowerment (Böhm, 2023; Bache, 2010). The principle of proportionality in EU cross-border cooperation ensures that actions are appropriately scaled to their objectives, preventing excessive regulatory intervention. It supports balanced governance by aligning the scope of actions with their intended outcomes, facilitating effective and harmonious regional integration. Partnership emphasizes the importance of multi-level collaboration across various stakeholders, including public, private, and civil sectors, enhancing policy relevance and adaptability through inclusive governance (Perkmann, 2003; Knippenberg, 2004; Börzel, 2007).

This governance model not only preserves administrative functionality but also fosters social cohesion, creating a collective identity and mutual interdependence across European regions, thus embodying the EU's commitment to engaging all governance levels in addressing transnational challenges (Palermo, 2007; AEBR, 2006). Such frameworks are vital for sustainable development in border regions, where economic, social, and cultural coherence is essential (Nadalutti, 2015; Perkmann, 2003).

Recognizing the established benefits and the institutional foundations laid by governance frameworks like those discussed, it is crucial to also consider contemporary challenges and the evolving roles of CBC as highlighted in recent studies such as Böhm's analysis. In this respect, Böhm (2023) outlines CBC's multifaceted roles in addressing the re-bordering tendencies heightened by crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. By illustrating CBC as not merely a governance mechanism but also a vital instrument for regional development, paradiplomacy, and reconciliation, Böhm highlights its pivotal role in sustaining border regions amidst nationalistic retrenchment. His critique is pointed, noting that unilateral national actions during the pandemic not only undermined the seamless integration facilitated by CBC but also jeopardized the socio-economic interdependencies that benefit border communities.

Böhm challenges the peripheralization of border areas, advocating recognition of their unique socio-economic contexts, which are often overlooked by centralized policies that fail to capture the lived realities of these regions. His analysis calls for a resilient CBC framework that can withstand the pressures of nationalistic policies, ensuring that border areas remain vibrant zones of dual identities and solutions, rather than being marginalized by one-size-fits-all approaches.

Böhm's analysis is supported also by this research. Despite being regarded as peripheral zones compared to their core capitals (Interview with an official from the intergovernmental commission on cooperation and border issues, 2024¹), cross-border zones are *sui-generis* because they are characterized by a specific kind of social, community life that is of a cross-border nature:

“There is an identity that is cross-border. This means that there is a cross-border perspective that is tied to the territory. When you live in a border area like X, you know that there is another possibility on the other Y side of the border. Thus, there is a dual brain. Whatever the problem is, there are two solutions (interview with a governmental officer who works at the CBC level, 2024).”

¹ Interview, 10 July 2024.

As pointed out by Jessop, interests are not merely reflections of subjective identities but are shaped by the broad socio-economic and territorial contexts in which actors operate (Jessop, 2016: 93-94). This reasoning justifies why several interviewees in this research talk about ‘a community that acts as *one* although it is divided by a border’ (interview with a representative of the European Territorial Cooperation, 9 July 2024; emphasis added). Cross-border areas exemplify a dynamic, interdependent relationship between borders, states, and societies (Anderson and Liam, 1999), marked by their unique territorial traits, governance models shaped by local actors’ intentions and values (Nadalutti, 2015), and distinct political structures that directly impact economic and social policies.

As an interviewee stated:

“When national actors involved in European lobbying believe that the cooperation benefits those from another state more, there are concerns. When this cooperation is managed from the capital, colleagues think we (the actors who focus on CBC issues) are conceding too much to our neighbours. *This is about developing the cross-border region. With cross-border cooperation, we are not just aiding our neighbours; we are helping our own citizens living on the frontier* (interview with the author, 10 July 2024; emphasis added).”

Following Paasi’s analytical framework on territorial identity (1991; 1996), it can be said that the interview underscores the dichotomy between two distinct practices within the realm of CBC. On one side, nationalist practices, rooted in a strong sense of national identity, advocate for maintaining rigid borders, reflecting a protective stance towards national interests. On the other, cross-border practices champion the development of a transnational region, emphasizing cooperation and mutual benefits. These practices not only aim to assist neighbouring states but also serve the local population residing in border areas, challenging the traditional notions of borders as barriers and redefining them as zones of potential synergy and collective growth. This contrast encapsulates the ongoing tension and negotiation between sovereignty and integration, which are central to understanding the dynamics at play in cross-border cooperation.

This research employs Practice Theory to scrutinize cross-border cities – conceptually referred to as ‘double cities’ or ‘twin cities’ – a domain markedly underexplored through this theoretical lens. This deliberate analytical choice to pivot from a broader regional focus to the nuanced interplay at the city level emerges from a critical gap identified in existing scholarly discourse. As shown so far, Practice Theory offers a robust framework for understanding the dynamic interrelations and socio-economic negotiations inherent to these urban cross-border spaces. By adopting this lens, the study innovatively explores how these cities, as delineated in interviews and official documents (ESPON, 2018), cultivate distinct socio-political identities and negotiate their interconnectedness through everyday practices. This approach not only advances our theoretical grasp of cross-border phenomena but also reinforces the argument for more granular studies of borderland dynamics, positioning this research at the forefront of contemporary geographical and political analyses.

In the next section I will introduce the theoretical framework.

5. Critical Analysis of Practice Theory and Communities of Practice: Insights and Implications for Cross-Border Cooperation

Practice Theory emphasizes the significance of routinized behaviours, known as practices, which are composed of interconnected elements: material, competence, and meaning (Adler and Pouliot, 2011).

Material refers to the physical objects and technologies involved in a practice, such as the infrastructure and economic tools used in CBC in Europe, like bridges and communication networks that facilitate integration. *Competence* involves the skills and knowledge required to carry out these practices, exemplified by the expertise needed to navigate and implement cross-border policies and initiatives effectively. *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 underpin and motivate collaborative efforts across national boundaries. This triad of elements highlights how practices are embedded in tangible *resources*, *skilled performances*, and *shared interpretations*, crucial for fostering and sustaining cross-border cooperation in Europe (idem.).

Furthermore, Practice Theory facilitates a *longue durée* approach, enabling a nuanced historical analysis of cross-border cooperation practices. This perspective is particularly relevant for contextualizing the enduring cross-border interactions between Gorizia and Nova Gorica, where past events have significantly shaped current practices. By examining these practices over an extended period, we gain insight into how historical legacies influence present-day cooperative efforts and help sustain them despite evolving socio-political dynamics. This historical lens not only enriches our understanding of material, competence, and meaning within cross-border contexts but is essential for a comprehensive analysis that appreciates the depth and persistence of these interactions.

From what has been said, it comes to the fore how this theoretical lens is particularly useful for understanding EU cohesion policy and CBC. By focusing on practices, we can analyse the shared knowledge, cultural codes, and systems of symbols that are conceptualized, elaborated, and produced by cross-border communities. These practices shape their actions and constitute their social cross-border life (Reckwitz, 2002). Practices such as social actions and relationships produce and shape spaces (Soja, 1985).

Embracing a reflexivist approach rooted in constructivism, it is crucial to emphasize the advanced nature of using ‘practice theory’ to analyse borders. Unlike Sohn and Scott (2020), who interpret borders primarily as ‘semic’ elements – dynamic and constantly reshaped by human activities – this approach prioritises the practices over symbols that define and redefine border spaces. While Sohn and Scott’s analysis provides insights into symbolic interpretations, the shift towards practices offers a more direct engagement with the mechanisms that actively shape and alter the contours of borders.

Sohn and Scott (2020) argue that borders, even when made invisible or functionally irrelevant, still retain a potent symbolic presence that shapes regional identity and social dynamics. This focus on the symbolic aspects partially neglects how material and everyday practices construct social realities. Accordingly, by concentrating on the symbolic significance of borders, Sohn and Scott may overlook day-to-day practices that actively

construct and reconstruct these borders. I suggest that these practices, linked to the Lockean conceptualization of ‘experiences’, ranging from daily commutes across borders to the enforcement routines of border control agencies, embed borders deeply in the social and material fabric of life, beyond merely their symbolic interpretations. Hence cross-border symbolic meanings are themselves outcomes of specific practices. For instance, the way people interact with borders in their daily lives – be it through commuting, shopping, or working across them – might influence how these borders are symbolized and understood politically and socially.

Cross-border integration cannot be fully grasped without considering practices that force us to engage ‘with the relationship between agency and the social and natural environments, with both material and discursive factors, and with the simultaneous processes of stability and change’ (Adler and Pouliot, 2011). It is a fact that bordering processes do not only concern physical realities but communities’ actions and border groups mobilization that conceptualize, form, develop and understand borders through ideologies, symbols and discourses (Paasi, 1986; van Houtum, 2005). Within these practices, it is important to consider debordering and rebordering processes.

Anssi Paasi’s (1986) conceptual framework delineates how bordering and re-bordering processes are not merely marginal or peripheral adjustments but central to the institutionalization of regions, transforming abstract socio-spatial identities into recognized administrative entities. His framework posits that this transformation occurs through a dynamic interplay between individual agency and broader structural contexts – key tenets of Practice Theory as discussed by Adler and Pouliot in 2011. According to Paasi (1986: 121), the institutionalization of a region unfolds in four stages: (1) the emergence of regional consciousness; (2) the development of a regional identity through socio-spatial processes; (3) the establishment of institutional frameworks to support that identity; and (4) the eventual recognition of the region as a functional administrative entity.

As this identity solidifies, institutional frameworks are established to support and formalize cross-border collaboration, ensuring that policies and administrative practices reflect the region’s unique binational character. An example is the EGTC-GO established between Gorizia, Nova Gorica and Sempeter on the Italian-Slovenian border in 2011 to streamline collaboration and unified urban planning, addressing the unique challenges faced by this CBR (Nadalutti, 2020). As stated by a local politician: ‘Certainly, before the establishment of the EGTC, Gorizia and Nova Gorica were quite marginal in relation to their national cores. However, these cities have successfully capitalized on their cooperation’ (Italian Politician, 20 July 2022). Indeed ‘The EGTC-GO functions more like a laboratory: being composed of local municipalities, it facilitates easier interactions. Cross-border actors convene almost daily’ (interview with an officer of the EGTC-GO, 28 July 2022). Another actor shares the same view: “We as EGTC have a single administration made up of people who come from both sides of the border, we speak daily with people from all three municipalities, and this produces new ideas, new projects. Hence our vision of the area as a unicum: for us it is ‘the territory’” (30 March 2023). This interview shows that ‘ideas’ and ‘projects’ emerge from the practice of meeting regularly and not vice versa.

Eventually, this constant interaction leads to the transformation of the area into a recognized, functional and social administrative entity that transcends the mere geographical union, embodying a model of integrated European urban development (interview, 23 June 2023).

An administrative official of the EGTC-GO stated in an interview given to 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 people and those who had lived through more complicated times. But young people no longer say, ‘I’m going there’; if anything, I go to that particular place, I go to that certain shop: they say the name of the place, not ‘in Italy’ or ‘in Slovenia’².”

This statement is indeed in line with Practice Theory since it highlights how daily activities and interactions, fundamental elements of PT, are redefined and shaped by broader economic and political changes, embedding new social practices within the community. These practices are carried out by ‘communities of practice’ that include state leaders, expert panels, investors, development professionals, and societal groups.

To sum up, Practice Theory highlights the interplay 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). Moreover, this analytical approach complements the Paasi and van Houtum’s analysis that focuses on a people approach, since Practice Theory dives deeper into how everyday interactions and routines actively shape CBRs. Additionally, this approach illuminates the enduring influence of historically ingrained practices that shape these regions over the *longue durée*, offering a nuanced understanding of how deeply embedded social patterns inform contemporary cross-border dynamics. In the following section, this theoretical framework will be operationalized in the Gorizia-Nova Gorica case study, which has been chosen for its emblematic geopolitical role after WWII, and nowadays as European Capital of Culture 2025.

6. The case study in context: The History of the Slovenian-Italian Border

The history of the Slovenian-Italian border is characterized by significant political, social, and ethnic changes that reflect the broader European historical context. The border’s origins can be traced back to the sixteenth century when the Treaty of Worms established a boundary between the Republic of Venice and the Hapsburg Empire. This delineation remained largely unchanged until the twentieth century, illustrating the relatively stable nature of European borders during this period (Bufon, 1993).

The conclusion of World War I brought dramatic changes to the border’s configuration. The Treaty of Rapallo in 1920 significantly altered the region, incorporating the Slovenian territories of Görz, most of Carniola, and the Karstic littoral into the Kingdom of Italy. This incorporation brought approximately 300,000 Slovenes, about a quarter of

²Available at : <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Italia/Gorizia-Nova-Gorica-l-utopia-concreta-e-rivoluzionaria-di-Gect-GO-223817>

the Slovene population, under Italian rule. While the treaty required Yugoslavia to protect minority groups within its borders, it did not impose similar obligations on Italy regarding its newly acquired Slovenian population, reflecting the unequal power dynamics of the time (Bufon & Minghi, 2000; Sluga, 1994).

The interwar period and the rise of Fascism in Italy had a profound impact on the Slovenian minority. Mussolini's regime embarked on an aggressive Italianization campaign, which sought to assimilate Slovenes through policies that suppressed their language, culture, and identity. This campaign was driven by a belief in the superiority of Italian 'civiltà' and 'patria' (superiority of Italian civilization and homeland), and it involved both legislative measures and violent actions aimed at eradicating the Slovene cultural presence (Šabec, 2005; Sluga, 2001). The Fascist period thus left a legacy of fear, mistrust and ethnic tension that would persist for decades afterwards.

World War II and its aftermath further complicated border dynamics. In 1941, Fascist Italy invaded Yugoslavia, incorporating Dalmatia and occupying Slovenia up to Ljubljana. The end of the war saw the liberation of Trieste by Yugoslav resistance forces and the subsequent diplomatic struggle over the territory. During the brief Yugoslav occupation of Trieste in 1945, an unknown number of civilians were killed, and a significant exodus of Italians from the Slovene Littoral and Istria occurred as they fled Tito's repressive regime. These tragic events are part of the broader historical context known as the 'Foibe Massacres', which involved the execution and disposal of victims into natural sinkholes called 'foibe' during and after World War II. The violence was part of the ethnic and territorial conflicts in the region, reflecting the complex interplay of nationalistic and political tensions (Bufon & Minghi, 2000; Šabec, 2005).

The immediate post-war years saw the establishment of the Free Territory of Trieste, divided into Zone A, administered by the Allied Military Government, and Zone B, under Yugoslav administration. This arrangement was formalized in 1954 by the London Memorandum, which granted Zone A to Italy and Zone B to Yugoslavia. Despite these political resolutions, the region remained a point of contention and symbolic of the broader Cold War divisions between the West and the communist East (Sluga, 1994; Bufon & Minghi, 2000).

The 1960s and 1970s marked a period of gradual normalization and cross-border cooperation. The London Memorandum officially recognized the Slovenian community in Trieste and Gorizia, providing for cultural and educational rights and the establishment of institutions to support the Slovene minority. Economic and cultural interactions increased, supported by bilateral agreements and the establishment of organizations like the Slovensko kulturno gospodarska zveza (SKGZ: Slovenian Cultural-Economic Association) and the political party Slovenska skupnost (SSK: Slovene Union), which played crucial roles in fostering cross-border relationships and economic development (Šabec, 2005).

In 1975, the Treaty of Osimo further solidified the border arrangements and established comprehensive minority protections. This treaty facilitated extensive cross-border economic and cultural cooperation, although the political will to fully implement these measures was often lacking on both sides. Nonetheless, the provisions of the Osimo Treaty, including language rights and the support of minority organizations, represented significant progress in minority protection and cross-border relations (Šabec, 2005).

The dissolution of Yugoslavia and Slovenia's subsequent independence in 1991 marked another turning point. Slovenia's independence brought economic changes rather than political upheaval for the Italian minority, as their rights were already established under the Yugoslav constitution. The new Slovenian state continued to guarantee these rights, reflecting a continuity in minority protection despite the dramatic political changes (Šabec, 2005). However, representatives of the Italian minority community in Slovenia have indicated that rights, although established on paper, often remain unimplemented in practice (interviews with high representatives of the Italian minority community in Slovenia, 2008; 2024).

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the European Union's influence became increasingly significant in shaping cross-border cooperation. EU initiatives like Interreg and Phare promoted economic integration, infrastructure development, and cultural exchange, although initial efforts often faced challenges due to differing administrative systems and levels of experience between Italy and Slovenia. Over time, however, these programmes facilitated greater cooperation and the development of joint projects, highlighting the EU's role in transforming the border from a site of conflict to one of collaboration (Panteia, 2009).

In this prolonged historical context, Practice Theory offers a critical lens for understanding the enduring socio-political practices that have shaped the Slovenian-Italian border. Centuries of power dynamics, cultural exchanges, and identity struggles have solidified into long-lasting social practices, each layer building upon the sediment of the past. By incorporating the *longue durée* perspective, it becomes clear that contemporary cross-border dynamics are not merely products of recent political decisions or economic changes but are deeply rooted in these historical practices. These practices, though continuously evolving, maintain a core derived from historical contexts, providing a foundation for the resilience and adaptability of cross-border interactions today. Recognizing these deep-seated practices is essential for comprehensively understanding the border's modern-day governance and CBC.

7. Communities of Practice Across the Border: The Gorizia-Nova Gorica Experience

Utilizing Practice Theory, the section examines how local actors, including municipal leaders and community members, actively shape cross-border practices and identities in the cross-border space of Gorizia-Nova Gorica.

In their analysis Paasi (1986) and van Houtum (2005) have critically examined how nation-states engage in deliberate practices aimed at strengthening their borders. These practices are not merely administrative or security measures but are deeply intertwined with the state's pursuit to affirm its sovereignty and identity. Through such processes, borders become active instruments in the political and cultural maintenance of space, underscoring the state's interest in delineating clear territorial boundaries that reinforce national cohesion and control.

Clearly, the ongoing use of borders as tools for statecraft and identity formation, as discussed by Paasi and van Houtum, is reflected in the experiences of communities directly impacted by these boundaries. The example from the Gorizia and Nova Gorica

border area vividly illustrates how borders can be re-envisioned not only as barriers but as opportunities for collaboration and unity.

As an interviewee put it, ‘The territory encompassing Gorizia, Nova Gorica and the surrounding areas was historically a unified region under a single state during the Habsburg rule until World War I. During this period, there were no borders or divisions. However, over the past century, we have found ourselves divided by a border, *a condition that does not reflect our intrinsic nature*. The EGTC-GO offers not only a retrospective step in a positive sense but also enables us to become actively involved in joint planning efforts. Our aim is to transcend the physical boundaries and barriers imposed by differences in legal systems, languages, and other administrative, linguistic, and social challenges that have been institutionalized. We hope to overcome these obstacles and re-establish fruitful dialogue among ourselves’ (interview with an Italian municipal councillor in charge of cooperation, 25 October 2018). This enduring context of cooperation underscores a *longue durée* of cross-border interaction and integration that is pivotal to understanding these phenomena. This interview shows that through the EGTC-GO, the physical boundary can be transformed into a shared space (material), community leaders enhance their CBC skills (competence), and both cities cultivate a unified identity (meaning), distinctly illustrating the convergence of these critical elements.

Moreover, this interview clarifies that the resilience and capability to form cross-border practices reveal the profound agency of local communities in shaping their own social landscapes and governance structures, often producing a counter-narrative to the national interests prescribed by state policies. It highlights the inherent capacity of border communities to create spaces of cooperation that navigate and sometimes transcend the divisive nature of physical and political boundaries.

In the context of the European Capital of Culture Nova Gorica 2025, there is a notable interplay between formal and informal communities of practice. The formal entities, such as the ‘GO! 2025’ team and the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, along with designated officials from Gorizia, Nova Gorica, and Šempeter-Vrtojba, are tasked with delivering a structured, top-down cultural programme aligned with strategic objectives. This approach leverages political and institutional roles to enhance visibility and manage cross-border cultural initiatives, supporting the overarching ‘borderless’ narrative (Nova Gorica Second Monitoring Report, 2023).

Hence, as emerges from the analysis of the Second Monitoring Report (EU Commission 2023), the EGTC-GO is clearly trying to respond to the principles of CBC as subsidiarity and partnership. For instance, the joint announcement by the Mayors of Nova Gorica and Gorizia, coupled with the Slovenian Government’s financial commitment, and endorsement from Italian institutions at various levels, implicitly demonstrate the principle of subsidiarity and partnership, ensuring that decisions supporting the ECoC 2025 project are made collaboratively across multiple layers of government to directly benefit the communities involved (European Commission, 2023: 5-6).

On the other hand there are ‘informal’ communities, comprising local artists, cross-border citizens, and volunteers. For instance, educators from schools in both Gorizia and Nova Gorica collaborate on educational programmes that serve students from both cities, promoting joint cultural exchanges (interviews with the author, 2022-2024).

This community of practice give importance to shared interests in both learning and performing that link together individuals. They are not just interested in theoretical knowledge; they also put what they know into practice.

This engagement is crucial, as it transforms the community into a living, evolving space where members learn from each other, improve their skills, and collectively push the boundaries of their domain. A concrete example that elucidates this is an awarded project under the b-solutions' initiative, which aims to tackle hurdles that hinder cross-border cooperation between EU regions: 'Cross-border Bike Sharing' (b-solutions, 2021). This project aimed to integrate existing bike-sharing systems between the two cross-border cities of Gorizia and Nova Gorica. The goal was to establish a functional, integrated bike-sharing system managed by GECT-GO before the European Capital of Culture event in 2025 (<https://euro-go.eu/en/notizie-ed-eventi/news/le-bici-go2go-diventano-borderless/>). The Assistant Director of the EGTC- GO stated in an interview for the Osservatorio Balcani:

"I think of what we have achieved with 'bike sharing' in the city (of Gorizia and Nova Gorica): you can pick up a bike in the Slovenian part and return it in the Italian part, a single card, a single tariff, all bypassing the complications that would have arisen having two managements [of] different and separate nationalities. For me, this represents what we could achieve for other services by applying real cross-border cooperation: my dream is to be able to achieve joint cross-border public services, with a single manager covering the territory, on both sides of the border (2023)."

This initiative exemplifies the *material* aspect that is represented by the physical infrastructure of the bike-sharing stations, the bicycles themselves, and the technological systems used for bike management and customer service, all of which are essential for the practical implementation of the project. This initiative thus embodies a community of practice in which regional stakeholders collectively learn, adapt, and integrate resources to promote a shared goal of improved cross-border mobility and sustainability.

Meaning is fostered by a shared understanding of sustainable transportation and environmental consciousness across the Italian-Slovenian border, reflecting a collective identity focused on ecological responsibility and cross-border connectivity. *Competence* is demonstrated through the collaborative efforts of both countries to develop and manage a unified bike-sharing system, which involves navigating and harmonizing diverse administrative and operational challenges inherent to cross-border initiatives.

Civic organizations and cultural groups engage in continuous collaborative efforts driven by shared goals and mutual interests. Another emblematic example cited by the AEBC's b-solutions' initiative (<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/institutional-cooperation>) is the re-development of Piazzale della Transalpina/Trg Evrope, which exemplifies the integration of Practice Theory and the concept of a community of practice into urban transformation (GO2025; Il Sole 24, 2024). This project, coordinated by the GECT-GO, reflects a communal endeavour where shared goals, mutual interests, and common values are paramount (Slovenian municipal officer, 30.03.2023).

The urban transformation is not merely physical but also symbolic, fostering a participatory culture among stakeholders. As another interviewee put it:

"An important project involves the collaboration between the public green spaces of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, aiming to unify the landscaping of the two cities through distinctive garden arrangements. This endeavour seeks to beautify

the cities in a unique manner. These steps are leading us towards the creation of a *single, cohesive city*, an initiative made possible by our participation as a European Capital of Culture (interview with a regional stakeholder, 2023; emphasis added)."

This redevelopment serves as a purported exemplar of how cross-border practices can be integrated into urban transformation. However, a critical examination raises several concerns about the depth and authenticity of these claims.

Firstly, the project's *material* aspect involves the aesthetic unification of the landscapes between Gorizia and Nova Gorica, aiming to create a single, cohesive urban environment. While this endeavour may alter physical appearances and potentially enhance the visual appeal of the area, one must question the extent to which such material changes foster genuine *social* integration. The risk here is that the transformation may prioritize physical unification over substantive, interactive connections between the cities' residents, potentially overlooking deeper socio-economic and cultural divisions that might persist beneath the surface.

Secondly, the *competence* of the EGTC-GO in managing such a complex transformation is crucial. The organization's ability to integrate diverse community perspectives and navigate local cultural dynamics is vital for the project's success. The initiative's effectiveness hinges not only on urban planning expertise but also on the profound engagement with the community's actual needs and values. There remains a critical gap in understanding whether the stakeholders have addressed these issues by involving the border population. Hence, it is questionable whether this redevelopment is merely a top-down imposition rather than a true reflection of communal aspirations.

Lastly, the symbolic *meaning* attached to the project as a step towards creating a unified city is compelling yet warrants scepticism. The narrative of unity and shared cultural identity, reinforced by the area's status as a European Capital of Culture, presents an idealized vision of what urban transformation can achieve. However, the imposition of a new urban identity might mask unresolved issues or force a superficial sense of community without addressing underlying tensions. This corresponds to the statement of one interviewee:

"The guiding theme of our Bid Book³ is 'go-borderless', meaning the fact of breaking down this border that is not there on the land but still exists in people's minds. And this was an interesting theme for the European Commission, because Nova Gorica, which was the official candidate, connected with Gorizia (interview with a regional stakeholder, 2024)."

While the potential of this territory to foster integration through active practices and the involvement of Communities of Practice is significant, it is important to reiterate the array of challenges that persistently obstruct the formation of a cohesive community. There are cultural and socio-political challenges that complicate integration and cooperation across this border as well as administrative, legal, and fiscal barriers.

³ The Bid Book is a detailed document that outlines the vision, objectives, cultural programme, and planned projects for Nova Gorica and Gorizia as they prepare to hold the title of European Capital of Culture. This bid was crucial in their candidacy and showcased how these twin cities aim to use the ECoC opportunity to foster cultural growth, enhance cross-border cooperation, and boost local and regional development.

For instance, on the Italy-Slovenia border, the Interreg V Management Authority (2014–2020) in Trieste, along with the founders and promoters of EGTC-GO, initially promoted the novelty of the EGTC-GO as the sole recipient of EU funds. This set-up meant that a single entity would operate across the border. However, this arrangement faced practical challenges. An interviewee (13 February 2024) reported that when the EGTC-GO was recognized as the institutional body that coordinates and manages the cultural programmes and initiatives for the Gorizia-Nova Gorica European Capital of Culture event, a significant issue arose concerning the management of the funding from the Slovenian Ministry of Culture in Ljubljana. The Slovenian government objected to directly allocating Slovenian funds to an entity governed by Italian law. Consequently, to ensure proper traceability of funds, it was necessary to establish the Javni Zavod (GO! 2025) on the Slovenian side, a public institute tasked with carrying forward the projects of the European Capital of Culture.

The creation of this additional structure, while seemingly at odds with the goal of unified cross-border governance, addresses a pragmatic need within the legal frameworks that currently govern international financial transactions. This divergence from the EGTC's ideal of seamless, borderless cooperation underlines the complex interplay between national laws and international collaboration objectives. The situation partially challenges the fundamental principles of joint CBC action and the overarching purpose of EGTCs. However, the necessity for Javni Zavod emerges as a practical, albeit imperfect, resolution to adhere to legal constraints and advance the projects' objectives.

8. Conclusion

I highlighted that the core objective of this research was to explore the question: 'What practices contribute to the emergence and coherence of cross-border regional spaces?'. This was done within the theoretical framework of Practice Theory which, by focusing on 'practices', emphasizes how the everyday practices within these regions actively shape perceptions and construct new symbols, thus modifying the symbolic landscapes in which they operate.

This analysis suggests that while there is an identity that is linked to the border, the community refers to itself not through a shared regional or national identity but through *functional, collaborative networks that overcome traditional boundaries*. The real operational concept at borders like Gorizia and Nova Gorica is that of a 'functional community'. These communities are characterized by practical collaborations on economic and infrastructural projects that foster a sense of unity, irrespective of the national identities on either side of the border.

It has been shown that the operationalization of Practice Theory through cross-border communities' activities differs from the 'people approach' as theorized by van Houtum. The former provides a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of how and why regional identities and communities through cross-border practical engagements (or the lack of them), through their repetitiveness and ordinariness, sustain existing structures and/or transform and negotiate societal norms. Hence, Practice Theory provides a deeper, more dynamic insight into how cross-border interactions contribute to the ongoing process of community and identity formation.

The analysis of the Gorizia-Nova Gorica case, as ECoC, highlighted that integration is not solely the product of political and economic imperatives. The establishment of the EGTC-GO, while intended to foster a harmonious integration of Italian and Slovenian cultural and administrative practices, demands a more rigorous evaluation. The initiative, celebrated for its innovative approach to CBC, indeed exemplifies the potential for border areas to serve as dynamic spaces for socio-economic and cultural integration. However, the outcomes of such integration appear less transformative than the model might suggest.

Critically examining the EGTC-GO through the lens of Practice Theory – considering the dimensions of material, competence, and meaning – reveals several shortcomings. *Materially*, while infrastructure projects such as the interconnected urban spaces between Gorizia and Nova Gorica demonstrate a tangible commitment to integration, these efforts often result in superficial connectivity that fails to significantly impact the daily lives and economic realities of the border populations. This suggests a discrepancy between the physical manifestations of cooperation and their practical utility.

In terms of *competence*, the administrative bodies involved in the EGTC-GO, although well-intentioned, have encountered significant challenges in aligning policies and practices across diverse bureaucratic cultures and legal systems. This misalignment raises questions about the actual capabilities of these bodies to enact policies that effectively address and reconcile the complex needs of the cross-border community.

The *meaning* attributed to these cross-border initiatives, while rich in symbolic value – promoting a sense of shared identity and community – often does not translate into deeper socio-economic integration. The celebrated ‘cultural blending’ and small-scale projects may foster a temporary sense of community and cooperation but lack the depth needed to effect lasting socio-economic change. The narrative of integration is thus more emblematic than substantive, pointing to a need for a re-evaluation of how these practices contribute to, or fall short of, realizing the broader objectives of European integration and genuine cross-border unity. Hence, the examination of the legacy of these activities warrants a thorough analysis, which is beyond the scope of this article and presents an opportunity for future research.

Finally, due to spatial constraints, specific choices have been made in selecting the practices and communities of practice to be analysed here. Priority was accorded to those practices actively involved in integrating Gorizia and Nova Gorica into a unified city for the European Capital of Culture event. This focus reflected the aim to examine communities directly contributing to achieving this cohesion through the EGTC-GO.

Although it would have been intriguing to analyse ethnic national minorities’ practices, this aspect has been not emphasized here. A profound dissatisfaction was expressed regarding the absence of initiatives promoting ethnic cooperation, compounded by a general lack of enthusiasm and cultural engagement expected of such a significant event. These findings highlight the complexity of minority inclusion, suggesting a need for future research that probes not only top-down institutional strategies but also the extent to which there is a dynamic willingness among minority groups themselves to engage collaboratively and inclusively, both within their own groups and across other minority and majority communities. This future investigation aims to unravel

whether systemic issues in inclusion are due to the absence of such multi-directional engagement.

To conclude, while the EGTC-GO establishes a significant precedent in cross-border cooperation, the actual outcomes call for critical reassessment to ensure that these practices not only represent, but genuinely achieve sustainable, meaningful integration to address fundamental socio-economic and cultural disparities.

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