

# WHAT FUTURE FOR THE CONCEPT OF BORDERLESS EUROPE?

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON THE PERSPECTIVES  
OF BORDER POLICIES AND TERRITORIAL  
COOPERATION IN AN AGE OF MULTIPLE CRISES

PANEL 5: Re-charging Borderless Europe: EU policies and local  
examples



NATIONAL RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT  
AND INNOVATION OFFICE  
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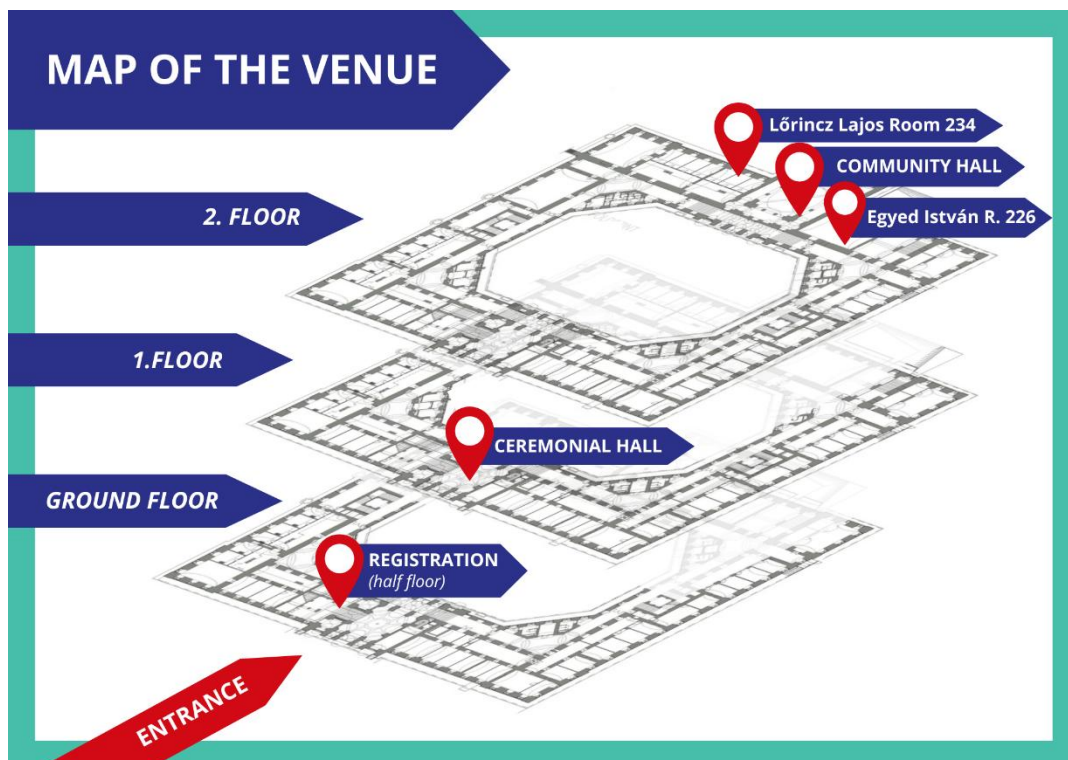


## Time

13 May 2025: 16:45 to 18:15

## Venue

The venue of the panel is Ludovika University of Public Service, Ludovika Main Building, 2nd floor, Lőrincz Lajos Room 234



## Topic

In this panel, the focus will be given to EU policies and local initiatives challenging re-bordering phenomena and facilitating cross-border integration in its physical, governance and legal aspects.



## Speakers and presentations

### Anne Thevenet

*Euro-Institut Kehl, Germany*

Anne Thevenet has been working at the Euro-Institut since 2005, currently as Deputy Director. She holds a diploma in Political Sciences and a master's degree in European Studies and in Management. Her field of expertise are the coaching of stakeholders and cross-border groups / teams, the design and delivery of training courses as well as the design and moderation of workshops and conferences. Moreover, she works on several projects, which aim at combining practical and scientific approaches on cross-border issues. Since 2010, she has coordinated the Transfrontier Euro-Institut Network (TEIN), which brings together 20 members from 12 different European border regions as well as 2 associated members.

### 1. Cross-border expert groups: an informal governance tool to facilitate cross-border integration?

The presentation will demonstrate how a group of experts from both sides of the border, as an implementation of the horizontal integration theory, can help to facilitate and improve cross-border cooperation. The topic will be approached from a practitioner's perspective, namely the Euro-Institut, an organisation working in the field of cross-border cooperation based at the Franco-German border in the Upper Rhine region. The Euro-Institut supports and coordinates several non-formal thematic groups of experts composed of administrative staff from various local authorities in France and Germany (sometimes also Switzerland), allowing them to exchange on different policies and their implementation, cross-border cases, current topics as well as obstacles. These expert groups are to be differentiated from the “institutionalised” expert groups existing for example in the Upper Rhine Conference., Our analysis will focus on two of these groups: “Health and safety at work across borders” as well as “Childhood protection”. These groups have been coordinated by the Euro-Institut for respectively 30 and 10 years at the request of French and German stakeholders. After a short presentation of these two expert groups and their objectives, the presentation will explore four main strands by answering the following questions:

- What is the added value for the experts themselves (taking a step back while learning about different practices and approaches; facilitating their day-to-day professional lives; deepening their knowledge and developing their competences) as well as for their institutions/administrations (visibility; finding answers to cross-border questions; best practice exchanges)?
- How do the groups contribute to the prevention and resolution of cross-border obstacles (by creating a network of competences; by introducing a “cross-border reflex”)?



- What is the role of the Euro-Institut as an intercultural coordinator, moderator and mediator (taking into account the different cultures and languages; responsibility for the organization, reporting and logistics)?
- What are the challenges while building successful expert groups (asymmetry of competences; intercultural and linguistic dimension; distance / time; political and financial support; turnover)?

The presentation will then discuss perspectives:

- What are the benefits for other stakeholders / citizens outside the expert groups?
- Can those local examples serve as a model for re-charging borderless Europe? And if so, under which conditions? Could it be a concrete and easy way to implement horizontal integration on the ground?

Thereby, the presentation seeks to inspire other border regions / other institutions working with the aim of facilitating cross-border processes and cooperation.

## Joanna Kurowska-Pysz

*WSB University, Poland*

Joanna Kurowska-Pysz is an associate professor at WSB University in Dąbrowa Górnicza, Poland, and serves as the Director of the Research Institute on Territorial and Inter-Organizational Cooperation. She is a doctor of economic sciences with a habilitation. Key research topics: public governance, inter-organizational cooperation and cross-border cooperation. She balances her academic pursuits with a professional career in consulting. She specialises in cross-border research methodologies, designing cross-border policies and strategies, evaluating the INTERREG programmes, and managing cross-border projects under the INTERREG Programme. She has been working for the European Commission (DG REGIO) as a Senior AMI Expert. She primarily focused on studies of borders in Central and Eastern Europe.

## 2. The EGTC Polish-Lithuanian Cross-Border Functional Area as a driver of cross-border relations in the shadow of military tensions surrounding the Suwalki Gap

The Lithuanian-Polish borderland is one of the least populated peripheral areas of the European Union. The region faces numerous socio-economic challenges, which cross-border cooperation should help address more quickly. The border itself runs from the Lithuania–Poland–Russia tripoint southeast to the Belarus–Lithuania–Poland tripoint. It is known as the Suwalki Gap, and it plays a crucial geopolitical role, as it is the only land connection between the Baltic countries and other European Union and NATO countries. After the Russian aggression on Ukraine, this area has become a strategic venue and hot spot, straggling numerous political and socio-economic consequences of this event. There are, among others,



military tensions around both tripoints of the border, migrant attacks from the Belarusian side, intensive refugee flows from the Ukrainian side, as well as a decline in investments, cross-border commerce, and services, along with an outflow of tourists, mainly foreign tourists. Considering these challenges, Lithuanian and Polish stakeholders operating in the border region have decided to strengthen cross-border integration and cooperation by utilising all available tools and resources on both sides of the border. They initiated vibrant cross-border activities that integrated most of the actors on the ground, which can be considered good practice for other borderlands struggling with crises. This study presents the development process of the EGTC, called "The Polish-Lithuanian Cross-Border Functional Area", which was established to address the crisis mentioned above and to govern the Touristic Cross-Border Functional Area, designed in the borderland in 2020 and intended to catalyse tourism development in the future. Based on cross-border flows and linkages among actors cooperating within this functional area, other cross-border grassroots initiatives have emerged, aiming to counteract the deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the region and mitigate the impact of the geopolitical crisis. One such initiative is the introduction of a CLLD-driven approach to the further development of cross-border cooperation, which is currently being implemented as part of the European pilot programme "Resilient Borders" (February-September 2025). This study presents ongoing findings and preliminary conclusions based on qualitative and quantitative research, including interviews and surveys conducted by the author in the Lithuanian-Polish borderland between 2020 and 2025. They demonstrate how cross-border local communities, adopting a participatory approach, can enhance cross-border relations and foster their resilience by utilising the available tools and resources.

## Martin Unfried\*

*ITEM Maastricht University, The Netherlands*

Martin Unfried is senior researcher at the Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross-border cooperation and Mobility (ITEM) of Maastricht University. He is the project leader of the annual ITEM cross-border impact assessment study and has developed the "ITEM methodology" together with his ITEM colleagues. In 2021, the obligation for a border impact assessment was integrated into the assessment framework of the Dutch national government based on ITEM's work. Martin has been participating in many EU funded projects as ESPON, Interreg and assignments from DG Regio of the European Commission on Territorial Impact assessment and cross-border labour markets. He has been involved in the realisation of cross border information points and the establishment of Cross border employment-services at the German-Dutch and Dutch-Belgian border. In 2024, together with his ITEM colleague Pim Mertens he conducts comparative research on the situation of various cross-border labour markets in the EU.



## Pim Mertens

*ITEM Maastricht University, The Netherlands*

Pim Mertens is scientific coordinator at the Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross-border cooperation and Mobility (ITEM) of Maastricht University. In this respect he has been working on cross-border cooperation and mobility from a legal and governance point of view. He is one of the coordinators of the annual ITEM Cross-Border Impact Assessment and has published several cross-border impact assessments himself as well as contributions on the methodology itself. Currently, he is working in the Cross-Border Coordination Point between Flanders and the Netherlands, as well as in other (Interreg) projects.

### 3. Horizontal instruments for EU cross-border regions: a critical review

The paper will focus on the analysis of different instruments for enhancing cross-border cooperation within the European Union. We refer to the notion of Joachim Beck who speaks about “horizontal integration” as a specific form of European integration (Beck, 2022). In this respect, the purpose is to get a better grip on cross-border cooperation in the context of the internal market, the four freedoms and the multi-level governance system of the EU. Meaning, that the situation at the internal borders of the EU is very particular and border studies in this context belong to the field of European integration research. In this paper, we will further develop on a concept introduced by former DG Regio official Dirk Peters who described cross-border cooperation as a multi-stage rocket. In his view, the first established stage is funding and joint strategies for cross-border regions, secondly territorial cohesion policies developed cross-border legal forms to facilitate cross-border cooperation. Finally, there is the idea to come to an instrument that allows cross-border activities to enjoy more room for legal flexibility. We would like to expand this scheme and discuss the role and usefulness of additional instruments, as experimentation clauses, (deminimis) derogations, or regulatory sandboxes. In this respect we also refer to the dossier of last years’ ITEM Cross-Border Impact Assessment (Mertens & Unfried, 2024). The assumption is that next to funding (INTERREG) and the existing legal instruments for cross-border organisations (EGTC), there is also a pressing need to come to better frameworks and legal instruments to overcome persisting cross-border obstacles (Fejes & Ocskay, 2023). To make Peters’ multistage rocket complete, we argue to also add a first fundamental layer, that is sound ex-ante cross-border impact assessment and ex-post policy evaluations. Meaning the legislators, at the EU, national and regional level should better integrate potential effects for cross-border territories in their law-making. So in our view, the multistage rocket moves from general instruments supporting the functioning cross-border territories (do no harm), to specific instruments addressing the needs in cross-border territories and different levels of cross-border integration. Regulatory impact assessment in this respect, should allow governments to better include the specific characteristics of the cross-border territory (including aspects as mobility, cooperation etc.) in policymaking. Secondly, financing of projects stimulates the cross-border interaction and can



also contribute to stable cross-border networks, where, thirdly, governance instruments as the EGTC can foster capacity building and the strengthening of cross-border entities with a real cross-border view. Finally, we will discuss the need of legal instrument that allow Member States and regions to accept legislation from the other side of the border in very specific cases (as it was proposed in the European Cross-border Mechanism). We will also refer to the new EU facilitation tool and analyse whether the new regulation could be a first step into this direction. In sum, we would like to discuss today's mix of horizontal instruments, on both EU and multilateral or national level, and elaborate for the future what innovative elements could be promising to overcome persistent cross-border obstacles. The underlying assumption is that vertical EU integration measures (as EU legislation) is not sufficient for tackle specific problems at internal borders.

*\* Speaker presenting the paper*