

Local governments and diplomacy: towards new territorial organization at the French-Luxembourg border.

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Extended abstract (1 200-2 000: 1 532)

In the Greater Region, there are no “twinning” or “sister-cities”, but relations between local authorities have existed for a long time. These were informal relationships between local authorities who knew each other through friendly relations, for example invitations to local ceremonies. Today, relations have strengthened and are more institutionalized. Encouraged by the EU, the European cohesion policy offers different legal and financial tools to support these local relations. States have signed agreements which legally strengthen this cooperation. Municipalities are taking advantage of these new tools to institutionalize their relationships. They are part of cross-border governance at several levels.

Local governments develop para-diplomatic relations. This means that sub-state governments maintain international relations with their counterparts. Diplomacy is not only a matter of state, but local governments also have the possibility of negotiating with their counterparts, always respecting the role of each administrative level and international law.

The study will start by analyzing the evolution of cross-border relations at the local level. Why and how do local authorities strengthen links across borders? Borders no longer separate but bring together local actors. The municipality represents the smallest administrative subdivision with an elected council, its own powers and its own budget. They are autonomous and on both sides of the border, the municipalities exercise compulsory powers in terms of territorial planning, environment, education and optional skills in terms of housing, tourism, culture, sport, etc. They face common challenges in many areas and cross-border cooperation offers opportunities to resolve these challenges. The areas of cooperation will be specific to the political, economic, social, environmental and cultural context of the territories concerned. Luxembourg attracts many cross-border workers, linked to salaries much higher than those offered in neighboring countries. This has a strong impact on border municipalities in terms of development (housing, amenities, services, transport, etc.).

The municipalities have a role to play alongside that of the regions and the States. Multi-level governance is thus being put in place in border areas. This development results above all from the development of bilateral relations between States (Franco-Luxembourg Intergovernmental Commission), treaties and agreements which define the

framework of infra-State relations; in the case of the Greater Region, several agreements are applied (Karlsruhe Agreements, Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, various conventions in specific areas). The European Union also helps to strengthen links between municipalities. If relations had remained informal for a long time and were limited to friendly meetings, the opening of borders within the Schengen area and the EU's cohesion policy gave new impetus to these relations. The EU has encouraged cross-border cooperation since the Madrid Framework-Agreement in 1980. Legal tools have been created such as EGTCs, and financial resources have been granted to communities which develop cooperation (ERDF and INTERREG program). The EU encourages the decentralization process. France is part of this evolution as evidenced by the 3DS law (Differentiation, Decentralization, Deconcentration, Simplification) of February 2022. This law grants more freedom to sub-state communities.

Several cross-border institutional structures have been created. Even if they are mainly consultative, they bring together local authorities from both sides of the border around the table and help guide local policies. The most important structure which defends the interests of municipalities alongside those which represent the States (Intergovernmental Commission and Summit of the Greater Region set up in 1995) and the regions (Interregional Parliamentary Council created in 1982), is Euregio Saar-Lor-Lux +. Created in 1988 under the name Comregio, then Euregio in 1995, it brings together a certain number of municipalities in the Greater Region and carries out actions in the field of tourism or the learning of Frankish – the local dialect that became the national language in Luxembourg in 1982 ; it contributes to strengthening a cross-border identity, or even a cross-border regionalism. The role of municipalities is far from negligible and continues to grow up.

Alongside Euregio, there are several more modest cooperations in terms of number of municipalities; they can take the form of cross-border agglomerations when the municipalities are contiguous on both sides of the border or even networks of cities when it is a reticular process. Case studies can illustrate the objectives pursued by municipalities through these cooperations, what are the most promising areas, best practices, but also the obstacles encountered. We rely on interviews carried out with local governments (mayors, councilors), intermunicipal and cross-border structures to carry out this study.

A new territorial organization is emerging at the local level with the establishment of cross-border agglomerations and city networks. The agglomerations studied will be those of the European Development Pole of Longwy initiated in 1985, that of Esch-Belval and Kilbri created in the 90s. There are also several cross-border city networks which structure the Greater Region: Quattropole created in 2000 between Luxembourg city, Metz, Saarbrücken and Trier, LELA+ between Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Longwy and Arlon in 2006, which became Tonicités in 2011 when Metz and Thionville joined it. These

cooperations take place within recognized institutional structures such as EGTCs and offer numerous advantages: better local governance with the establishment of cross-border municipal councils, cross-border development plans, a participatory urban planning policy and thus greater visibility of the actions carried out among citizens, etc.

However, they also underline the limits of these relations with still numerous legal and administrative obstacles, the lack of financial, human and technical resources of French municipalities compared to Luxembourg ones. This imbalance between the municipalities on either side of the border represents a significant obstacle in terms of possible achievements, but also on a relational level with a feeling of inferiority of French local governments. As a result, it is mainly intermunicipal structures that participate in cross-border cooperation to compensate for the weaknesses of the municipalities. Certainly, these structures have increasingly broad powers, especially on the French side, whether in the field of territorial planning, economic development, environment, etc. but their resources remain limited.

Disparities should also be highlighted between urban and rural municipalities. The French municipal landscape is made up of a multitude of small municipalities, in which governments have very few resources and appear rather reluctant to develop links across borders. As a result, it is mainly urban municipalities that develop relationships with their border partners. Rural communities are developing more informal links, by organizing joint events (cultural and sporting meetings), or simply by inviting their counterparts to local festivals. These joint meetings are particularly important to establish later more formal structures, but also to get to know neighbors better, to break down prejudices in a context of rising populism, from the far-right wing in border communities, particularly in rural communities.

Finally, if there are no linguistic barriers between France and Luxembourg, the concepts used do not necessarily have the same meaning. Projects co-funded by the EU focus on the development of common glossaries intended among others to local decision-makers.

The various obstacles that appear, however, do not prevent progress in cross-border cooperation and strengthening the diplomatic role of local authorities.

What lessons can be learned from this already existing cooperation? What development prospects? Ambitious projects are emerging, such as creating a vast cross-border metropolitan area, the “cross-border polycentric metropolitan region”, a project presented by ESPON in 2011. Large intermunicipal structures are being organized with the creation of the “Sillon Lorrain European metropolitan center” and the “North-Lorraine border metropolitan center” between eight intermunicipal structures. The objective is to be more visible at the European level and to have more weight compared to the Luxembourg territories and the Luxembourg metropolitan area. However, today it is more modest cooperation projects along the border that are bearing fruit, such as cross-border towns or even cross-border city networks. These local initiatives must be further

supported by regional and national levels as part of a “bottom up” process. Multi-level cross-border governance should be improved by simplifying structures and avoiding the institutional patchwork that currently exists in the Greater Region.

But the expected improvements are mainly at the financial level; the French municipalities are requesting the application of the Geneva model, a tax retrocession such as also exists between Luxembourg and Belgium for 40 Belgian municipalities. This principle of compensation should allow local authorities to invest in amenities, infrastructure and services intended for border populations. This Franco-Luxembourgish stumbling block is far from disappearing. Modestly compensating for this shortfall, the municipalities benefit from European funds which allow them to carry out cross-border projects. The creation of “functional areas” -with a dedicated budget- within the framework of INTERREG VIA program allows for strengthening cooperation. Two zones have been defined at the French-Luxembourg border: the “Esch-Belval EGTC” between eight French municipalities and five in Luxembourg in 2024 and the “Cross-border Natural Territory of Chiers and Alzette” between four French municipalities and one in Luxembourg in 2025. The EU continues to encourage cross-border cooperation with new tools such as the BRIDGE for EU regulation to remove obstacles to cooperation.

Thus, the paradiplomacy carried out by local authorities should continue in the years to come. The local level is important in cross-border cooperation alongside regions and states because municipalities represent the level closest to the citizen; they know their needs and local actions have more visibility, even if communication on cross-border projects must be improved to further develop the feeling of belonging to a common shared space.