

Cross-border living areas as popularisation of cross-border integration? Debating “Bacino di vita” and “Bassin de vie”

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Abstract

The notion of cross-border living areas (“Bassins de vie”/“Bacini di vita”) is part of the reflection on how the European integration process affects border regions. A transdisciplinary conference, held in Rome in April 2024, discussed this concept for the border region between Italy and France. Based on a number of impressions collected during the conference, the paper debates if and to what extent this concept can offer a contribution to addressing cross-border integration in the European framework. We claim that, despite the continuity of arguments on cross-border delimitations and cross-border governance, the concept of cross-border living area has the potential to popularise the debate on border related issues, in particular by bridging gaps between the policy world and the academic sphere.

Keywords

Cross-border integration, European Union, Governance, Quirinal Treaty

The concept of “bacino di vita”/“bassin de vie”: The policy perspective

The Quirinal Treaty, signed between Italy and France on 26 November 2021 and ratified by both countries the following year, pursues the objective of enhanced cooperation in the common context of the European Union and Euro-Mediterranean relations. The Quirinal Treaty reflects the structure of similar experiences carried out by the French government (namely, the Treaty of Aix-La-Chapelle, signed in 2019 with Germany, and the Treaty of Barcelona, signed in 2022 with Spain), addressing a number of sectoral fields.

Article 10 opens by stating that “the French-Italian land border constitutes an interconnected *living area* (*basin de vie* in French, *bacino di vita* in Italian), where

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the Italian and French populations share a common destiny. The parties commit to facilitate the daily life of the inhabitants of these territories” (translated by the authors from the original Italian and French versions). In this context, the Treaty therefore aims to support “projects that favour the integration of this space and the realisation of its human, economic and environmental potential”.

Although the text of the Treaty explicitly refers to the land border, an extensive interpretation has followed, including the maritime border between Italy and France. Article 10 provides for the establishment of a “Border Cooperation Committee, chaired by the competent ministers of the Parties”, which also brings together “representatives of local authorities, border authorities and border cooperation bodies, parliamentarians and central administrations”. The Committee met for the first time on 31 October 2023 in Turin, with a composition that included relevant central governments and sub-state actors (from regions to municipalities) from land and maritime Italy-France border sections. The Committee can be said to propose a new model of multilevel governance for cross-border interactions (Coletti, 2024).

The “*basin de vie*” (or “living area”) is a French concept. It has in fact been used by the French national statistics institute (INSEE) since 2003, to define the smallest portion of territory, where inhabitants use the most common services and infrastructures. Those living areas are defined as territories that are geographically, socially, culturally and economically coherent, expressing homogeneous needs in terms of activities and services. As of the 2012 revision, INSEE has defined 1,666 living areas throughout France (including overseas territories).

The concept of “cross-border living areas” was adopted by France for the first time in 2021, in order to exempt cross-border citizens (commuters, but not only) from a number of documents and obligations required at the border due to health emergency. The reference to cross border living areas in the Quirinal Treaty has stimulated a growing attention to this concept and on its implementation, as there is no precise and operational definition of what is meant as cross-border living areas and how they should be designed and with what extension (CESER Grand Est, 2022; Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière, 2024).

The concept clearly fits the debate around the protection of the daily life of cross-border citizens facing an unexpected crisis that followed Covid-19-related border closures (Peyrony et al., 2021: 54; Medeiros et al., 2020; Coletti and Oddone, 2021).

Following this debate, the revision of the Schengen Borders Code, adopted in 2024, includes as one of its key points measures to limit the impact of possible border

controls on border regions, e.g. by facilitating the crossing of the border by workers and establishing green lines (European Parliament, 2024). Moreover, in order to safeguard the interests of cross-border regions, it also provides for Member States with common internal borders to determine which parts of their territory are to be considered cross-border regions, taking into account the strong social and economic ties between them (art. 42b). Such a provision poses questions of delimitation at cross-border scale under the spotlight, emphasising the role of national scale in this framework.

The role of the national scale for cross-border issues is, more generally, solicited by the renewed political sensitivity of European borders, resulting from the multiple crises of recent years. The need to balance border management as a prerogative of the central government with the protection of the specific needs of border communities has posed new challenges that require renewed answers and conceptualisations. Moreover, border regions pose specific governance challenges, in the framework of a wider reconfiguration of multilevel governance balance following the experience of the Covid-19 emergency (Salerno and Iacoviello, 2022). If and to what extent the concept of 'basin de vie' can offer a contribution in this framework is an open issue, to be discussed in light of the evolution of concepts and tools around cross-border integration in the European framework.

The background of this paper is a conference held in Rome on April 18th 2024 on “Cross-border living areas: a laboratory of European integration between Italy and France” (Rome, 2024). The aim of the conference was to put together different voices, from academic and policy fields, to discuss the meaning and potential of the “basin de vie”, and its specific implementation in the French-Italian borderscape (and beyond). The academic contributions included perspectives from geography, spatial planning and law; the participation of practitioners and policy makers included different institutional scales (from the national ministries of foreign affairs responsible for the implementation of article 10, to regions and local authorities) and different roles (from political representatives to administrative staff).

Cross-border integration as analytical background

The notion of “Bassins de vie”/”Bacini di vita” is part of the reflection on how the European integration process affects border regions. For a long time, the European integration process was considered as a predominantly intergovernmental and supranational dynamic. Only since the 1990s, the regional scale of integration

dynamics was addressed in a more explicit way – in particular with regard to multi-level governance and with regard to cohesion policy (Hooghe & Marks 2003). In this period, also border regions received increasing attention, soon linked to the new cooperation programmes of INTERREG (Reitel et al., 2018). Border related disparities and differentials became more visible with enlargement rounds, and border related obstacles became more pressing with more interaction across the borders, in particular with the implementation of the Schengen agreements.

We now look back on approximately three decades of EU related integration research in border studies. Simplifying to a certain extent, we can identify three rather prominent strands of academic debate, namely:

A) The spatial development perspective

An important question has been how border-regions are affected by European integration and the liberalisation of internal EU borders. In the early years, the oftentimes implicit belief is that the stronger European integration takes place, the more would border regions benefit, and the more intense convergence processes are to be expected. De Boe et al. (1999) illustrated this postulate in a prominent manner, feeding the preparation of the ESPON programme and contributing to the debate on European spatial planning perspectives. The postulate of cross-border cohesion through integration remains important (Jakubowski & Wójcik, 2023). However, empirical findings show a more complex and differentiated picture of contemporary development (Capello et al., 2017). Actually, border-related development patterns are not less complex than domestic ones. The relevant patterns include cross-border metropolisation and polarisation (Sohn, 2013) and the interpretation of borders as integration motors or as a resource (Durand & Decoville, 2020). Socio-economic differentials are reflected as drivers for spatial patterns such as tunnel effects, spill-over patterns and others more (Chilla & Heugel, 2022).

With regard to functional integration, data analysis and shortages are prominent issues. Analysing border regions is systematically hampered by data shortages as, by definition, mandates of official statistics end at national borders (with the exception of Eurostat's mandate, however which is limited to a rather rough spatial scale. The only kind of data that produced (more or less) stable and meaningful results are labour-market data, leading to cross-border commuting statistics (cp. ESPON, 2021). When referring to cross-border functional areas, commuting data are the key arguments for their spatial definition. As an important result of data-driven research, cross-border

commuting areas are probably the most important regionalisation of cross-border dynamics. Comparably, for example, data for economic integration and transport flows are much harder to provide and are thus hardly ever applied on the pan-European level. Only in recent years, a more integrated perspective, based on different kinds of sectoral data, has been developed (Jakubowski et al., 2021).

B) The governance perspective

Throughout decades of developing, testing, and criticising cross-border cooperation, the academic reflection focused on several aspects. A high number of publications has reflected on governance related arguments and on a series of new tools. This includes institutionalisation formats as in particular the Euregio/Euroregions in the earlier years (Perkmann, 2007) and European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) in younger years (Ocskay & Scott, 2023). More recently, the endeavours of removing border related obstacles have been quite prominent (Medeiros et al., 2023), as well as the support to integrated cross-border territories, based on the diffusion at cross-border scale of instruments such as Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) or Community Led Local Development (CLLD). Those instruments, in particular, require specific governance arrangements based on wide stakeholders' involvement and participation (Pertoldi et al, 2022), and pose new delimitation and governance challenges at cross-border scale. More general concepts like “networks” have also played an important role. A very high number of studies has reflected on INTERREG related funding, be it on the project, the programme, or the governance level (Chilla & Lambracht, 2022). Regardless the juridical cooperation format, the perimeter question remains complex: The standard procedure for institutionalising a cooperation area is to “pool” domestic territories from both sides of the border, that can only partly cover de facto integration patterns on the socio-economic level.

C) A conceptualisation perspective

In parallel to these rather policy-oriented strands of debate, the conceptualisation of borders, border regions, and integration played a significant role. Whereas traditional geography, history and politics considered borders rather as objects in or of space, the conceptual turn in border studies reflected on borders as a process, as construction and bargaining process with underlying power plays (for a more recent overview see Scott, 2020). This is not the point to go into more detail, however, for

policy-oriented debates it is important that a border (region) is not a simple geographical feature that can be addressed in an easy one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, intervened and overlapping dynamics have to be considered in a reflected manner.

In sum, the reflection of border studies comes along as a rich and growing debate, involving a range of perspectives, but which are certainly not complete. What is in particular lacking is the bridging element between the academic discourse and the policy needs (transdisciplinary gap). Also, the stronger integration of disciplinary perspectives holds unexploited potential (interdisciplinary gap).

There are strong arguments to close the trans- and interdisciplinary gaps in border studies. This is, firstly, due to functional dynamics, like raising numbers of cross-border commuting in many border regions, in particular the more urbanised ones. In more rural border regions, demographic change tends to endanger a good level of infrastructure (Services of General Interest), calling for cross-border solutions. And, secondly, the need for trans- and interdisciplinary reflection is due to policy-related dynamics, in the framework of the renewed attention to border areas mentioned in the introduction. The conference that constitutes the background of this paper offered the opportunity for trans- and interdisciplinary reflection, as described in the following section.

Insights from the conference

This paper does not aim to systematically synthesise the contributions of the conference, nor can it formulate any form of politically aligned position (for a summary of the conference see Rubbino, 2024). Instead, it reflects impressions from the authors that felt highly inspired by the talks. The following, rather exploratory impressions are intended to be food for thought whilst reflecting on how to achieve the next level of cross-border development.

Impression 1: The “basin” as a geographical metaphor

During the conference, the concept of “bassin de vie” was framed in a discourse referring to a number of geographical features, reflecting the territorial diversity of the boundary between Italy and France. In the case of the land border, many speakers emphasised the role of the (Alpine) mountains but also, specifically, of the mountain passes to connect and create spaces of transit and exchange. The islands of Corse and Sardinia were referred to as a space of flows that create the conditions for culturally

and historically connected communities, as well as to the specific features of insularity. Also, the managing authority of the INTERREG maritime cross-border cooperation programme confirmed that the functional and institutional integration dynamics apply also on this maritime “bacino di vita”. This links back to the challenge to adequately define border regions and their perimeter, as reflected above through perspective A.

The metaphorical wording of the “bacino” is – obviously – far less technical than the established vocabulary of border related debates (such as “cross-border functional urban areas”, “cross-border public services”, etc.). It was inspiring to hear how the speakers built narratives on the hydro-geographic metaphor. Many of them underlined that water flows do not know borders, others mentioned that cooperation on water governance is an important task. It was argued that a “basin” has most of the water in the middle, inverting the idea of the border as the outer periphery. A political decision-maker from the Italian side, responsible for regional cross-border cooperation activities, was rather sceptical about the translation from French to Italian. He questioned if it really works as he sees the Bacino di Vita as a high mountain topography concept, different to the broader French understanding.

Nevertheless, the hydrographic dimension of the “basin”/“bacino” wording was not positioned as a conceptual argument but rather as a metaphorical reference. Its prominence might be because the French-Italian border is embedded in a high-mountain Alpine context, and topography tends to play a larger role there than in border regions beyond the Alps.

Impression 2: Continuity of arguments

Secondly, it was obvious that not everything that is discussed in the framework of cross-border living areas is fundamentally new. Both, the speakers from the academic and the policy side, referred to longstanding debates and illustrated continuity. In more or less extensive form, all lines of argumentation from a spatial development perspective (see perspective A above) were referred to.

On the policy side (cp. perspective B above), a series of speakers pointed at the importance of border-related mismatches in mandates and at obstacles in administrative and political regulations. In parallel to governance issues, functional barriers in particular in the fields of accessibility were mentioned. Presenters from the different regions illustrated the success that is mostly based on political collaboration and project-based cooperation that has been going on for decades. They introduced

several topics to be central when it comes to cross-border cooperation, including cross-border commuting, health, emergency services, accessibility issues, territorial planning, tourism, differences in taxes, etc. They also underlined unexploited potentials due to limited resources and limited instrumental capacity.

On the academic side, the speakers reflected the continuity of established concepts, such as functional integration (functional urban areas, local functional areas etc.), to the cross-border bassins/bacini. They referred to three decades of EU territorial monitoring (in particular the work in the framework of the ESPON programme) and also to domestic reflections of territorial dynamics illustrated. The role of services for delimiting cross-border areas was frequently recalled, and several experimentations on the definition of (cross-border) functional areas were presented.

Several speakers emphasised the framework of the European Union in which the concept of “bassin de vie” is embedded, implicitly linking the subnational scale of local specificities with the supranational scale of European integration; “bassin de vie” and cross-border areas more generally emerged as potential laboratories of resilience and European integration amidst a global polycrisis.

Impression 3: Governance instruments

Alongside the continuity of concepts and arguments with respect to cross-border integration and delimitations, the contributions presented during the conference also shed light on the number of existing tools that might be adapted to support the governance of bassins/bacini from an administrative and legal point of view. Not only several speakers – in particular among the practitioners – referred to the existing or potential European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) as crucial tools for managing cross-border interactions at subnational scale, but as well, they referred to other existing cross-border agreements or entities. Among those, different forms of bilateral agreements between Italian and French regions were mentioned; an interesting example is the Corse-Sardinia “Consulta”, established in 2016 and composed of the presidents and group leaders of the Regional Council of Sardinia and the Assembly of Corsica. Agreements exist also between French and Italian municipalities or associations of municipalities, including the long-lasting case of the “Conférence des Hautes Vallées”, a cross-border association of fourteen associations of municipalities and one city established in 2007 following a protocol of cooperation signed in 2000. This multiplicity of institutions was referred to in the sense that the

governance of “bacini di vita” does not have to start from scratch but can build on a series of established tools.

Not least, the multi-level governance of border-regions has to build on domestic instruments of territorial governance, and moreover, some of the instruments might be adopted to cross-border governance, including from the perspective of implementing the Quirinal Treaty (Salerno, 2022). For the Italian side, this includes in particular the so-called *programmazione negoziata* (negotiated planning). In particular (but not only) speakers with an expertise in public law presented a vast number of instruments developed to manage associations between municipalities or other subnational authorities, with a focus on the Italian framework. According to Italian Law, negotiated planning is to be understood as the agreed regulation between public subjects or between the competent public subject and the public or private party or parties for the implementation of different interventions, aimed at a single development plan. Several instruments were introduced in this framework (programme’s contracts, territorial pacts, area’s contracts, institutional agreements, framework programme’s agreements, network agreements, river contracts for the management of shared water resources; a reference was made also to the EU format of Local Action Groups) with different characteristics and structure. All these instruments are based on horizontal partnership and collaboration at local scale, recalling the principles of EU funded integrated territorial instruments; consequently, they offered to the discussion potential legal tools to be adapted for the governance of cross-border living areas. Another example that was presented is the Italian Strategy for Inner Areas (*Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne – SNAI*), a national programme supported by the Cohesion Funds since the 2014-2020 programming period in Italy, with the general aim of increasing opportunities and well-being in marginal territories characterised by structural depopulation and lack of adequate infrastructure. The methodology adopted by the SNAI for the identification of marginal territories, centred around distances and accessibility, could offer an interesting contribution to the discussion on the delimitation of cross-border living areas; and again, the multi-level governance system it foresees could contribute to the discussion on potential governance instruments for cross-border living areas (see perspective B above).

Conclusion: a popularisation of integration debates?

Several arguments across the conference tackled border related needs as they are in daily life, in “real world” beyond funding strands and governance terms. Many speakers mentioned the role of social interaction for understanding the concept of “bassin de vie”, emphasising the role of transnational solidarity and cooperation that derives from sharing the same living space. As well, the wish to involve citizens and local stakeholders in the definition and implementation of any successful cross-border strategy was recalled. Beyond technical debates and perspectives, border regions were addressed in a comprehensive and concrete way at the same time. “Bassin de vie” emerged as the result of the recursive practices and forms of “real life” in border-regions.

From the authors’ perspective, the conference on “bacino di vita”/”bassin de vie” showed an interesting momentum in the reflection of border dynamics. The high number of participants, the presence of high-level representatives, and the wide geographical background of the speakers can be seen as evidence for the relevance of the debate. On the policy side as well as on the academic side, the engagement of the speakers was high. Possibly, the “bacino”/”basin” metaphor plays a role as a new “projection screen”, allowing a broad range of actors to pursue their goals with a fresh wording.

From a linguistic point of view and due to the metaphorical meaning, it has the potential to overcome the otherwise rather technical sound of border related debates. If compared to the evolution of the concept of “functional areas” from which it originates, the concept of “bassin de vie”/”bacino di vita” offers a terminology that is less technical and more related to the life experience of citizens. One might critically add that this effect most probably is limited to some European languages. Even if the idea can be translated into other languages, as e.g. “cross-border living areas” in English, the metaphoric dimension cannot always be taken on board. Still, this endeavour shows the potential of popularising the debate on border related issues, and on how to bridge gaps between the policy sphere and the academic sphere.

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