Identity and Institutions Shaping Cross-border Co-operation at the Margins of the European Union

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ABSTRACT  This paper seeks to synthesize different theoretical approaches in studying cross-border co-operation (CBC) while considering institutionalization and identity-building as the two major processes behind cross-border developments. Since there still exist some gaps in explaining the conditions necessary for successful development of CBC at the margins of the EU, this paper attempts to contribute with empirical data collected from the Estonian–Russian and Romanian–Moldovan borderlands. The argument here is that CBC is relatively successful where it has developed more towards multi-level governance or where it has achieved institutional identity and acquired ability to shape the practices. This paper also suggests that where historical-cultural identity exists, it may provide a better ground in the development of cross-border activities, yet, this fact alone does not substitute institutional cross-border identity, a precondition for mobilization.

KEY WORDS: Multi-level governance, cross-border co-operation, institutionalization, identity-building, European borderlands

Introduction

Over the last decade the conventional cartography of nation-states delineated by hard borders has been challenged by the emergence of new cross-border co-operation (CBC) patterns. The first cases of CBC within the European Community appeared already in the 1950s and, since then, CBC has developed into a variety of institutionalized forms. In the course of time and due to the continuous European enlargement process, similar activities attempting to transcend the barriers to trade and people-to-people contacts have emerged more intensively at the external borders. But the question remains not yet fully answered—what kind of factors ensure successful development of CBC at the divergent borderlands? This paper aims to provide some of the explanations by comparing two cases of CBC at the margins of the EU: Estonian–Russian and Romanian–Moldovan borderlands, respectively.

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Today the EU has ended up with highly differentiated external borders and, more so than the borders inside the EU, these external borders need extensive support in order to achieve stability and cohesion. But the obstacles appear immediately when bilateral relations are focused upon. One may conclude easily that Estonian–Russian bilateral relations are a bit icy, regardless of the fact that Estonia has achieved the strategic objectives of its foreign policy in joining NATO and the EU. Almost constant tensions in bilateral relations are interpreted in Estonia as a manifestation of Russian neo-imperialism and as attempts to expose leverage in the post-Soviet space, while in Moscow they often refer to Estonian nationalism used by some politicians to gain domestic political capital. The same kind of bitter aftertaste appears in Romanian–Moldovan bilateral relations, where Romanians would rely on the “special relations” between the “two Romanian states”, but Communist-led Moldova implements cultural and linguistic policies propagating a distinct Moldovan identity, thus deepening the mutual mistrust and hostility between the neighbouring countries.

This paper seeks to synthesise different theoretical approaches in studying CBC, which is defined as “neighbourly co-operation in all areas of life between regional and local authorities along the border and involving all actors” (Martinos and Mahnkopf, 1999). This paper considers institutionalization and identity-building as the two major processes behind cross-border developments. On the one hand, CBC is shaped by the institutional context and, on the other, it is believed to depend on the existence of historical-cultural identity across the border. While the institutionalist perspective highlights the links among institutions, actors, identities, and the multi-level-governance model provides a general framework for the study of CBC as the interplay of institutions, actors, and identities at various levels of governance, it is believed that these approaches should be united into a broader framework.

The overall aim is to tackle a number of questions. What are the factors conditioning CBC and establishment of Euroregions? How does the institutional context influence the development of CBC? What is the role of cross-border identity (institutional and historical-cultural) in the development of CBC? The argument here is that CBC is relatively successful where it has developed more towards multi-level governance or where it has achieved institutional identity and acquired the ability to shape the practices.

**Broader Framework for Multi-Level Governance**

The multi-level governance model points to the growing powers of subnational actors who can act independently on both domestic and international arenas and create transnational links (Marks et al., 1998). This model expects that the subnational authorities, or “the third level of governance” (Bullmann, 1997; Grix, 2002), have a choice of influencing European policy through the member-state channels or by direct access to the European level. Whether the third level has already gained much influence in the decision-making process or not, is of lesser importance; what matters is that the subnational level possesses competences in certain policy fields and should be able to act in those matters that have impact on those policies (Jeffery, 1997). In the given framework, CBC becomes a matter of co-ordination among different actors and at different territorial scales (Leresche and Saez, 2002). It also involves the social construction of the border region, being “constitutive of the regional” as a field of action and knowledge” (Häkl, 2004) where cross-border identities are being negotiated and contested by multiple actors (Scott, 2004). While providing the general setting and the vocabulary for discussing CBC in a wider multi-level context, the multi-level-governance model alone does not provide sufficient tools to explain the development of CBC as such. As Bache (1998: 155–156) concluded, it is premature to assign much autonomy to the subnational level because the state remains a ‘gatekeeper’ in the policy-making process, allowing the subnational units to participate but not to affect the policy outcomes significantly.

‘New institutionalism’ views institutions as the carriers of norms that are important variables in the process of political decision making (March and Olsen, 1989). But institutions can also shape actors’ behaviour through path-dependency and institutional selectivity. According to this logic, actors may establish their identities and interests based on the previous policy decisions, which means that their interests are shaped by, or are endogenous to the institutional context. But, institutions do not “think, have preferences or act” but rather provide constraints to political actors who are “the only agents capable of goal-oriented action” (Marks, 1996: 5). Although Perkmann’s (1999) ‘new institutionalist’ approach allows much more power to institutions, this distinction allows an escape from the ‘structure-agency’ trap, which cannot account for significant changes in the institutional development and be fully explained by path-dependency but rather by strategic behaviour of certain actors. In the decentralized governance mechanisms, the policy problems of CBC may become clear only after or along with the evolution of the appropriate cross-border institutions and networks that are believed to shape their actions (Perkmann, 1999). As a result of their actions, the institutional setting itself undergoes changes not based on optimization logic but by the logic of the path-dependent evolution.

Whereas various approaches seek to uncover the effect of the institutional context on CBC, they would benefit more from the partial theoretical convergence between institutions, actors and identities. As the border, by definition, creates difference, constituting the identities of ‘us’ and ‘the other’, CBC depends on the re-imagining of ‘the other’. Van Houtum and Strüver (2002: 142) assumed that overcoming borders and mental distance through CBC involves the “re-imagining of the self vs. the other”. Yet, the process of building cross-border governance is dominated by top-down institutionalization, which explains why these regions exist “relatively separate from the everyday lives of ordinary people” (Paasi, 2001). Both Scott (1999) and Perkmann (1999) have indicated the lack of informal integration and small participation of NGOs in cross-border governance. Strüver (2004) and Scott (2000) also agreed that the EU attempts to boost CBC, as well as the activities of Euroregions, fail to mobilize popular attention and support. The establishment of cross-border institutions thus seems to occur separately from the informal interaction that may (or may not) go on at the border regions. Common identity cannot be simply imposed from above, but it should gain attention and acceptance of the population in order to become reality.

Perkmann’s ‘new institutionalist’ perspective is useful to explain the institutional framework of CBC but it does not take into consideration historical-cultural identity. He allows for some degree of actors’ rationality, albeit mostly related to short-term ‘entrepreneurship’ actions and strongly bounded by the institutional constraints in the longer run, but fails to recognize that human ‘rational action’ itself is socially
constructed and identity-bound, following the ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March and Olsen, 1989). Therefore, when individuals are socialized into a particular institutional context and take on particular roles, they also internalize the norms associated with these roles (Hall and Taylor, 1996). It is through such socialization processes that institutions are believed to constitute actors’ identity, self-images and preferences.

The question arises: does CBC depend on the (pre-) existing common identity in the border region? Or is common identity rather generated in the process of cross-border interaction and institution-building? In other words, which type of identity—institutional or historical-cultural—is more significant for successful CBC? While attempts to foster institutional identity in the Euroregions across Europe and especially on its external borders are faced with certain difficulties, the historical-cultural identity where it exists may not provide a sufficient basis for the development of CBC. Mainly, because states still “seek to control and produce territories and citizens” (Paasi, 2002). Although Euroregions seem to have a thin identity, exemplifying, what Paasi (2001: 14) called “regions on paper”, they “may one day turn into ‘regions as social practice’ that may have very concrete effects on people’s daily lives”.

Methodology

According to the theoretical model of this paper, institutions are believed to shape and structure actors’ preferences and actions and, thus, institutional context for CBC is the first independent variable. Cross-border governance involves multi-level framework, where the local/regional as well as supranational level are “pulling the blanket on themselves” from the traditionally strong national level. Since CBC involves the implementation of EU programmes, which demands multi-level governance mechanisms and an active participation of local/regional levels, one could assume that the more levels of governance the institutional context for CBC involves, the more successful CBC appears.

Another independent variable would be cross-border identity, yet here two distinctions should be made. The first type of identity facilitating CBC is the historical-cultural identity that may exist at the border region, which would involve ethnic, cultural or historical affinity between the two border communities. Where it is present, historical-cultural identity may facilitate communication and magnify the effect of other independent variables on CBC. The second type of cross-border identity could be called institutional identity, that is, identity generated by the existing cross-border institutions, such as Euroregions. It may exist when the population is well aware of the cross-border institutions and the opportunities they provide, and takes action to integrate and use these opportunities in their daily routines. Thus one may assume also that institutional cross-border identity is more important for successful CBC than historical-cultural identity.

This paper compares two case studies, within which it uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of research. Four groups of potential actors of CBC were identified to undergo 25 in-depth interviews in each of the Estonian-Russian and Romanian-Moldovan border regions (see Figure 1): 2 (1) officials, representing local and regional authorities; (2) NGOs and cultural associations; (3) businesspeople and the representatives of regional and local industrial and commercial associations; and (4) experts, represented by university scholars, the representatives of the EU and EU-affiliated agencies. Simultaneously, 70 standardized questionnaires were conducted in the same areas and representing the same categories of respondents. The sampling was not intended to represent the population of the border regions. Rather, it aimed to represent the actors of CBC in order to compare the perceptions

Figure 1. Estonian-Russian and Romanian-Moldovan case-study areas (Source: AS Regio © Regio 2005, www.regio.ee)
on different sides of the border. For example, the standardized questionnaires provided information about perceived efficiency of CBC at the local and regional levels. They assessed the cross-border policies at each level of governance and measured the level of benefit from increasing CBC. Moreover, the questionnaires enabled identification of how important was the cross-border identity or the lack thereof for CBC. Last but not least, they tackled the issues of social mobilization and institution-building. These two methods were complementary, and their combination allowed for both establishing correlations between the indicators for CBC on the one side, and the three independent variables—institutional context, institutional identity and historical-cultural identity—on the other, and for explaining the causal links between these indicators using the data from the in-depth interviews.

What makes CBC successful? The work in progress, its financial supplies and visible results, as well as the common belief that CBC creates benefits to engaged people and regions. While institutions are created to facilitate transactions, the CBC actors are presumably aware of existing institutions, and perceive them in positive terms in order to mobilize social action. For an institutional identity to develop, people see institutions more as opportunities and less as constraints. The standardized questionnaires provided information on the actors’ evaluations of the efficiency of CBC at the local and regional levels, which was taken as the most important indicator of the success of CBC. The perceived level of benefits from increasing CBC as well as from increasing economic interaction could also serve as additional indicators for CBC. At the same time, in-depth interviews provided additional information on whether the respondents were well aware of the Euroregion and its activities, and on what institutions they considered to be opportunities or constraints for CBC.

Why exactly were these cases chosen for comparison? Both Estonian–Russian and Romanian–Moldovan cases represent border regions at the EU external border with complicated bilateral relations and negative imprints on co-operative activities; they both involve top-down CBC institutionalization processes. The records of CBC success are equally modest in both cases. However, there are profound differences when it comes to the existence of historical-cultural cross-border identity. Estonian border regions have an extensive Russian ethnic minority in the north-east; however, on Estonia’s southern border with Russia, populated mainly by ethnic Estonians, the basis for the cross-border historical-cultural identity is rather limited. Yet, it is named there, on the southern border between Estonia, Russia and Latvia, that the Euroregion ‘Pskov-Livonia’ has been created. In the case of Romania and Moldova, one can talk about the same historical-cultural identity and the institutionalization of CBC which has also led to the establishment of the Euroregion ‘Upper-Prut’. Since the CBC achievements are equally modest in both cases, this comparative study aims to demonstrate that institutional aspects overrule the cross-border cultural identity grounds.

Multiple Actors and Institutional Context

Institutional initiatives for CBC exist at various levels of governance: for instance, the local-level public authorities contribute to the creation of Euroregions; the central level that provides the legal framework for CBC; and last but not least, the EU level provides the main financial mechanisms. Thus, one may say that CBC contributes to the creation of multi-level governance, where the local and European levels challenge the state’s powers from both sides. While CBC policies at the European level appear insufficient, their effectiveness is the highest compared with existing policies at the local/regional and state levels. The success of CBC has established strong correlations with the efficiency of CBC policies at the European level ($R = 0.44$ in the Estonian–Russian and $R > 0.60$ in the Romanian–Moldovan case study). The European-level CBC policies seem to be especially appreciated as “they provide assistance, information and ideas”.

The efficiency of CBC correlates rather strongly with the existence of institutional structures at local and regional levels in both case studies. The multiplicity of actors at local and regional levels, such as local and regional administration, NGOs and local/regional industrial and commercial organizations, appears to be linked to the efficiency of CBC, with the correlation over 0.40. When it comes to judging how actively various actors are involved in CBC, the local and regional administration, cultural organizations as well as private firms were assessed as most active, while NGOs, universities and industrial organizations (e.g. Chambers of Commerce) could do better. CBC is imposed from the top, because the role of small and medium-sized private business in cross-border contacts is negligible, and civil society is not sufficiently developed to back-up particular interests related to the border. It appears that CBC is mostly dependent on the EU funding schemes and programmes, and less on the real demand of co-operation and grass-roots initiatives.

**European-Level Initiatives for CBC**

As for European-level institutions, CBC is supported through different instruments: PHARE CBC on the Estonian and Romanian side and TACIS CBC on the Russian and Moldovan side. In the context of the EU Neighbourhood Policy, the two programmes are to be harmonized when it comes to funding and the application processes. For instance, the CBC Neighbourhood Programme between Romania and Moldova for the period 2004–06 has as its goal “to achieve the sustainable socio-economic development by developing the principle of CBC”. The Programme had five million euros of PHARE funds in its total budget for 2004, and foresaw setting up the necessary institutions on the Romanian side, which in the advent of Romania’s accession to the EU already mirror those of INTERREG in the EU countries: the Joint Co-operation Committee, Joint Steering Committee, and Joint Technical Secretariat, representing the local, regional and national authorities, NGOs, Chambers of Commerce, etc. from Romania and Moldova as well as representatives of the European Commission. Both sides are supposed to contribute to the joint annual progress reports for PHARE CBC and TACIS activities.

A similar path dependency appears in the establishment of the ‘Upper-Prut’ Euroregion which was initiated by the central authorities with a certain degree of paternalism to provide the necessary legal basis and to render its future activities more efficient (Gakman, 2000). At first, initiated by the Romanian side during the final negotiations of the basic Romanian–Ukrainian political treaty, the establishment of the Euroregion was reflected in Article 8 of the Agreement on Good Neighbourly Relations and Co-operation between Ukraine and Romania, signed on June 2, 1997.
The Moldovan side joined the process at the summit of the Presidents of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Romania, where they signed the Statement and the Protocol on trilateral co-operation (3 July 1997), thus encouraging the establishment of direct contacts between local and regional authorities of the countries concerned, cross-border initiatives and projects. With this legal act, Euroregional activities became a component of the interstate relations between Romania and Moldova.

As the present example demonstrates, the EU plays not only the role of a financial supporter, but also provides the legal basis for CBC as well as institutional blueprints for the creation of the Euroregions. Although, the EU has pushed the development of CBC between Estonia and Russia, these two countries appear to have adopted the EU policies in a rather slow manner. The legal basis for CBC has been absent: while Russia has joined the Madrid Convention and developed the Concept of Trans-Boundary Co-operation (February 2001), Estonia has not done so, and neither has Estonia developed any documents that would contain a description of the strategy and goals for the CBC with Russia. Many experts are still convinced that CBC between otherwise uninterested sides can develop only if there is external (European) funding. But even then, tough competition over EU funds have so far led to poor implementation of the goals of the New Neighbourhood Policy, where the majority of approved projects are between the Estonian and Latvian sides, and only very few involve the Eastern neighbour.

Although the setting up of the Euroregions' administrative structures and statutes has relied much on past experience in Western Europe, there has been little progress in the development of Euroregions at the Estonian–Russian and Romanian–Moldovan borderlands. Participants of the numerous meetings in the regional framework usually declare their intentions to develop economic contacts and other forms of co-operation. The Euroregion Council and Working Commissions have regular meetings where they discuss projects to be submitted to EU bodies and donor countries for financing. There is still a long way to go regarding adjustment of the legislation of the four countries, definition of the legal status of the regions, creation of regional bodies for auditing the projects, stabilization of the personal membership of Working Commissions, and creation of free trade zones in the framework of the Euroregion. The exact authorities of the Euroregions are not defined yet and the common interests of its members are not formulated (Skvortova, 2003).

State-level Initiatives for CBC

In Estonia, the major problem involves the cold political relations between Estonia and Russia, which leads to over-politicization of CBC and explains the lack of a legal base for CBC. A basic identity quest still underlies specific problems (“thematic hotspots”) in bilateral relations, such as the minority question, border and trade issues, transit flows and the status of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as mutual property and compensational demands. Although the Local Government Act was passed in May 2005, the passing of the Law on Foreign Relations, which describes the authorizations of state subjects (e.g. counties or regions) in their foreign relations, is pending in the Estonian Parliament. The Estonian government has been accused of failing to establish a constructive dialogue and of ignoring the potential benefits that may result from economic co-operation with Russia, while the federal power in Russia is often guided by considerations of ‘hard security’, thus disfavouring the regions’ growing activity on the international scene (Kolosov, 2004). In Russia there are serious bureaucratic obstacles to CBC at the state level, which limit the freedom of action of the regional authorities in their use of the financial mechanisms provided by the EU. Moreover, the position of the local authorities in Russia is even less envious, as there are no norms or established procedures for the realization of their activities in the sphere of CBC (Schlosberg et al., 2004). Despite the legal shortcomings, CBC still remains a part of domestic politics in Russia, being, for instance, connected to the governor elections, while it is a part of international politics in Estonia—of Estonian–Russian inter-state relations and Estonian foreign policy.

The state of political relations between the governments of Moldova and Romania is seen as the most serious obstacle to CBC, too. Relations between the two countries have run hot and cold since the Republic of Moldova became independent in 1991. The reasons for that lay in contested meanings of ethnic/national identity being reflected in the absence of a bilateral border treaty and a basic political treaty between Moldova and Romania. Whereas Romania is acceding to the EU and will introduce the Schengen visa system in due course, the Moldovan communist government is attempting to develop the Moldovan nation, which is believed to be a distinct historical entity that emerged from a cultural intermix of the two groups: the Romanianized indigenous tribes in the region between the rivers Prut and Dniestr, and the Slavs (see for example Stai, 2002). Moldova is accusing Romania of interference in its internal affairs and seems reluctant to accept the concept of “two Romanian states” or “special relations between Moldova and Romania”. However, engaged in the EU pre-accession process, Romania is now orientating its foreign policy towards developing political relations with the EU member states, while relations with Moldova may be left low on the priority list. As in Estonia, improving relations with the eastern neighbour in Romania does not help to win the support of the electorate (King, 2003).

The questionnaires confirm that CBC actors, especially in Estonia, perceive the lack of state assistance to CBC as an obstacle, more so than the lack of such assistance from the European as well as local levels. Both sides evaluated the implementation and efficiency of state-level policies as equally low (Av = 3.7 and 3.6), as compared to the local and regional levels. In Russia, state- and European-level CBC policies are assessed similarly as less effective than policies at the local and regional levels. This research and in-depth interviews demonstrate that in Moldova, the central level provides more obstacles than support for CBC. However, at the same time, unlike in Estonia and Romania, many CBC actors in Moldova consider state-level institutions to be the most important for CBC since the subnational levels lack financial autonomy and human resources, as well as sufficient information about financing opportunities.

Local-level Institutional Initiatives

Constraints stemming from the centre could account for the inactivity of local and regional levels in CBC: “state level is more important in setting the legal framework for co-operation, and the local level is responsible for the implementation of these
regulations and agreements”. While CBC between Estonia and Russia still largely depends on bilateral relations, one can see from these results that CBC is viewed increasingly as a matter of relations between subnational actors across the border, where the state level is less important. It is not only vertical governance structures that appear essential for CBC, but also horizontal networks, involving multiple actors aside from the local and regional administration, such as NGOs and local/ regional industrial and commercial organizations. As compared to Russia, the local level in Estonia seems to have more freedom than the regional level, which is “tied down to the state level and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs”.  

Local- and regional-level CBC initiatives at the Romanian– Moldovan border region appear rather limited due to the incompatibility of resources and functionalities. While in Romania the central government appears to encourage CBC and the regional level is financially and politically sufficiently independent, in Moldova the regions and municipalities lack the financial capacity to engage in CBC. The local government reforms carried out in 2003 reduced the powers of the local governments even more, curbing their financial autonomy and re-organizing the territorial units, replacing 10 entities (judets) with 31 smaller territorial districts (rayons) (European Commission, 2004: 6). On the Romanian side, many officials have noted that the regional level in Romania enjoys much more autonomy in its international and cross-border relations than the Moldovan counterpart. Romanian counties are also active members in a number of international bodies, for instance, the Association of the European Border Regions (AEBR), which helps them to “establish and maintain contacts with other regions in Europe, as well as to provide and receive information and expertise”. This seems not to be the case in Moldova, where NGOs, Chambers of Commerce and other local actors are not involved in CBC and do not have access to information about ongoing projects and their results. 

In the south-east of Estonia and the Pskov Oblast in Russia, CBC has been seen as a mechanism for regional development. Within this particular context, the Council for Co-operation of Border Regions was founded in 1996 with the aim of enhancing living conditions in the border regions and facilitating cross-border movement for local residents (Council for Co-operation, 2000). It was formed on the basis of 12 territorial units: five districts of the Russian Federation (Pskov, Pechory, Palkino, Pytalovo, Sebezh), four districts of the Republic of Latvia (Aukšte, Balvi, Ludza, Valka) and three counties of the Republic of Estonia, (Põlvamaa, Võrumaa, Valga). The establishment of a “Pskov-Livonia” Euroregion seven years later became necessary in order to move further in CBC with a more intensive involvement of public/private foundations and European agencies. The “Pskov-Livonia” Euroregion is, by and large, the only CBC institution on the Estonian–Russian border. However, its work has been assessed as insufficient by the majority of CBC actors, including the representatives of the Euroregion. The activities of the “Pskov-Livonia” Euroregion remain “an elite project”, involving mostly regional authorities on the Russian side and local authorities in the Estonian side of the border. The dominant role of the authorities in the development of the Euroregion, and the modest role of other actors of CBC, have contributed to the failed institutional efficiency and identity of the Euroregion, poor quality of projects and insufficient horizontal networks across the border and with the European partners. There is a widespread notion that the Euroregion is just a project-fabricating organization. 

The “Upper-Put” Euroregion was established in order to improve co-operation between the border regions of Romania, Moldova and Ukraine, whereas its creation was said to be a centralized process, rather than a result of the local/regional initiatives. The “Upper-Prut” Euroregion is about 29 000 km² in area, with a population of 2.9 million (Skvortova, 2003). The administrative units composing the region have a similar status within their countries, which significantly limits their authority and powers in addressing the local problems and the issues of CBC. The territorial-administrative reform in Moldova (2003) has even contributed to a slow-down of Euroregional activities. In light of this reform, the Moldovan side has failed to come up with two representatives of the new districts, which could be explained either by a lack of agreement between the regional authorities or a lack of motivation for CBC. Furthermore, the Upper-Prut Euroregion lacks funds for developing its administrative capacity and for attracting specialists who could consult and inform people about existing opportunities, as well as prepare and carry out CBC projects. Esanu (2002) pointed out a number of institutional obstacles to CBC in Moldova, which include the absence of governmental structures that would promote regional policy and support Euroregional activities; the absence of regional strategies of development; small economic potential and political weakness of the recently created territorial-administrative units; and their small access to external funding. The interviews demonstrate that CBC depends largely on existing EU support mechanisms and programmes for the development of CBC relations.

Cultural-Historical Bonds vs. Institutional Identity

One would assume that the basis for historical-cultural cross-border identity in the Estonian–Russian border region should be strong since, in 1991, the border cut through more or less integrated communities in the north-eastern and south-eastern parts of Estonia. However, while the majority of the population are ethnic Russians on both sides of the northern part of the Estonian–Russian border (69.5 per cent in the Ida-Virumaa and over 90 per cent in the Kingisepp district), the southern part of the Estonian–Russian border has demonstrated a clear-cut ethnic divide. According to King (2003), the cultural differences between Moldovans and Romanians have always been minuscule; “while both peoples had their own peculiarities and historical experiences, it was the political slant given to these differences—not the magnitude of those differences themselves—that had long kept an ethnic kin apart”. Yet, nowadays, one is faced with the reality of an independent Republic of Moldova and the Moldovan–Romanian language dictionary (Sătă, 2002). Yet, the cultural affinity between the two states is likely to persist behind the dominant rhetoric of the current Moldovan political leaders. It seems that, at present, the CBC between Moldova and Romania has historical-cultural identity as its strongest basis, since both the institutional context and the institutional identity are relatively weak. 

Institutional cross-border identity is conditioned by the favourable political context between the two countries, and by the efficiency and the public image of existing cross-border institutions, such as the Euroregions of “Pskov-Livonia” and “Upper-Prut”. The political context of cross-border relations between the two pairs
of countries can be characterized mostly in negative terms, where the contested meanings of nation and statehood have had negative implications on bilateral relations and weakened the potential of cross-border institutional identity. Another important precondition for institutional cross-border identity is the efficiency and public image of existing institutions of CBC, such as the Euroregion. For the Euroregion to be continuously efficient there should be opportunities to generate institutional identity in a given territorial unit, while erasing boundaries between the two border regions.

Estonian–Russian Borderland

The strongest basis for historical-cultural identity based on common ethnicity and culture can, thus, be expected only from the northern part of the Estonian–Russian border region, where the perceptions of ‘us’ and ‘the other’ should not be an obstacle to but rather an incentive for CBC. But even in the culturally similar, northern part of the Estonian–Russian border region, populated largely by Russian speakers, there now exists a clear mental border between ‘us’ and ‘the other’. The Estonian–Russian border generally has negative connotations of long lines at the border and, in the Consulates, high costs of obtaining visas, bureaucratic problems, as well as political context of the interstate relations, which invariably comes to mind. The border destroys existing ties, thus having a further separating effect. There is no perception of local cross-border historical-cultural identity; rather, people in Narva possess some kind of ‘Narvian’ identity, which is not Russian anymore, but has not yet become Estonian either.

The comparison of the means between Estonian and Russian responses illustrates remarkable differences in perceptions of the ‘other’. The majority of the interviewees on the Estonian side refer to the profound cultural differences between people on different sides of the border. The officials on the Estonian side often consider the Russians as less ‘Westernized’ and more dependent on “orders from above”. The majority of Russian interviewees point out the ‘Europeanness’ of the Estonian national culture and character, deliberately contrasting it with their national character and culture. Estonians are perceived as ‘accurate’, ‘hardworking’ and ‘obeying the law’, ‘reserved’ and ‘unemotional’; “They [Estonians] speak slowly, but work fast”. Many interviewees emphasized a disciplined and rational attitude to work, as well as a knowledge of foreign languages and European education in Estonia.

What could serve as the basis for development of CBC is the institutional cross-border identity, which depends on political relations between the local/regional as well as state authorities across the border, the (in)efficiency of cross-border institutions (e.g., the Euroregion ‘Pskov-Livonia’) and joined attempts of the local/regional authorities and other actors at ‘image-making’ of such institutions. In fact, many interviewees believe that CBC is necessary for people in the border regions, but that they are not aware of this, so “one has to force it upon them”. Although cold political relations between the two countries still remain a large obstacle to CBC, there is a shift away from viewing CBC as a matter of central governments. Local and regional authorities, as well as NGOs and businesses, are seen as proper actors of CBC, who should be supported by the state and Europe.

Romanian–Moldovan Borderland

The fact that people in the Euroregion ‘Upper Prut’ speak (more or less) the same language, and share a long common history dating back to historic Moldova, embracing the two banks of the river Prut, could be expected to be an important facilitating, if not motivating, factor for CBC. In fact, the questionnaires demonstrate that people in the Moldovan borderlands perceive the ‘other’ in very similar terms, even more so than people on the Romanian side (means = 5.0 and 4.3, respectively). Thus, Moldovans in the borderlands still share a strong common historical-cultural identity with the other side, despite the assertions of distinct ethnicity traits by Chisinau. The Moldovans, much more than Romanians, view the ‘other’ in positive terms as ‘hardworking’, ‘productive’, ‘friendly’, ‘peaceful’, ‘open’ and as ‘a part of the European culture’. The interviews also demonstrated largely very positive perceptions of the ‘other’ on both sides of the border, which view each other as belonging to the same nation—with a common history, culture, and language.

History and politics, however, have had their impact and, thus, although being the same people, Moldovans are perceived to have developed minor differences in mentality. Bessarabia, which constitutes most of the present-day territory of the Republic, has been a part of the Russian Empire since 1812, and part of the Soviet Union in 1940 as a result of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Only in the interwar period of 1918–40 was Bessarabia a part of greater Romania (Chinn, 1997). The resulting differences in Moldovan mentality and behaviour are said to be the fear of authorities, as ‘the partisans of the centralized system’ and ‘prisoners of the ideological system’, and that they are ‘quieter’ and ‘less daring’ than Romanians. Finally, the differences are also explained through a metaphor of a ‘poor relative’, or in other words, by the lower level of development and poorer living conditions in Moldova than in Romania.

The border is perceived in very negative terms by both sides, ‘a wall that separates’ culturally similar communities. Historical-cultural identity remains the strongest incentive to CBC, although, in Moldova, economic benefits appear to have become somewhat prioritized over cultural co-operation. Moldovans tend to see cross-border identity not from the viewpoint of historical-cultural but rather institutional identity, relating it to the efforts of political actors and media to build up an image of the border region, yet unsuccessfully. There seems to be a serious lack of consensus among officials involved in the activities of the Euroregion ‘Upper-Prut’ as to which model to use as an example for institution-building. The majority of the interviewees admitted that the creation of the Euroregion ‘Upper-Prut’ has not been ‘thought over carefully enough’. There are practically no results visible to the public of the activities of the Euroregion, and the reason is not poor media coverage, but the lack of initiatives, especially on the Moldovan side. Moldova has profited the least from TACIS CBC SPF funds among the EU neighbourhood third countries in the East, including Belarus.

Summing up Empirical Findings

One can see that in both case studies the local and regional levels appear the most important actors dealing with CBC, yet their effectiveness is assessed in rather low terms (see Table 1). The state-level CBC policies are seen as less efficient than the
Table 1. Average means for the indicators of CBC, institutional context, and historical-cultural identities in the Estonian–Russian and Romanian–Moldovan case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Estonian–Russian case study</th>
<th>Romanian–Moldovan case study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multi-level institutional context</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q512. Existence of Regional policies of CBC</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q523. Existence of National policies of CBC</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q514. Existence of EU policies of CBC</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q531. Local administration participation in CBC</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q532. Regional administration participation in CBC</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q533. NGOs participation in CBC</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q534. Local or regional Chambers participation in CBC</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cross-border institutional identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q521. Effectiveness of Local policies of CBC</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q522. Effectiveness of Regional policies of CBC</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q523. Effectiveness of National policies of CBC</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q524. Effectiveness of EU policies of CBC</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q411. Historical events among the two countries</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q417. Relations among governments</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q418. Relations among local/regional authorities</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q419. Political differences among regional and local administrative frameworks in both sides of the border</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cross-border historical-cultural identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q412. Cultural differences</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q413. Religious differences</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q422. Perceiving the ‘Other’ as Productive</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q423. Honest</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q424. Friendly</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q428. Disciplined</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>4.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q429. Similar to us</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4211. They have a ‘European culture’</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(The table continued)

Cross-border Co-operation at the Margins of the EU

Table 1. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Estonian–Russian case study</th>
<th>Romanian–Moldovan case study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success of CBC at the local level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q526. Efficiency of CBC</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q611. Benefits of greater CBC for our country</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>5.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q612. Benefits of greater CBC for the other country</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>5.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q613. Benefits of greater CBC for our border region</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>4.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q614. Benefits of greater CBC for the other border region</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>4.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The level of measurement is between 1 and 7.

European level in the Estonian–Russian case study and more important than the European level in the Romanian–Moldovan case study. The in-depth interviews also allude to the fact that in the case of Romania and Moldova, CBC is still very much a part of intergovernmental affairs. In both cases, the involvement of actors other than the public administration is assessed in poor terms. Besides, in both cases the efficiency of CBC policies at all levels is assessed more negatively than their implementation. The historical past between the two countries and their current political relations appear as a serious obstacle in the case of Estonia and Russia, while they are seen as an incentive for CBC in the Romanian–Moldovan case, according to the questionnaires. When it comes to cultural and religious differences, as well as to the perception of the ‘other’, they are more positive on the whole in the Romanian–Moldovan case, being an incentive for CBC. CBC is assessed as insufficient in both case studies, while the benefits from increasing CBC in the future are seen in very positive terms, especially so in the Estonian–Russian case study.

Correlations have been used as an additional source of information to provide evidence of causality, thus helping to determine general patterns in the CBC actors’ perceptions of CBC mechanisms, obstacles and benefits. One way is to look at the established correlation patterns between the indicators for CBC and for the three independent variables—multi-level institutional context, institutional identity and historical-cultural identity (see Table 2). In accordance with the traditional analysis of correlations in social and behavioural sciences, correlations between 0.20 and 0.30 are seen as low, those between 0.30 and 0.50 as medium, and those greater than 0.50 as strong. The number of correlations is also seen to be important, as well as their strength.

It appears that out of the three independent variables, institutional identity is most linked to the indicators for CBC in both case studies, although less so in the Romanian–Moldovan case study. Second in importance comes the multi-level...
Table 2. Correlation patterns between the indicators of CBC and independent variables in the Estonian–Russian and the Romanian–Moldovan case studies on the basis of the questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>CBC indicators</th>
<th>MLG institutional context (8 indicators: Q511-514, Q531-534)</th>
<th>Institutional cross-border identity (8 indicators: Q521-524, Q411, Q417-419)</th>
<th>Historical-cultural cross-border identity (8 indicators: Q422-424, Q428-429, Q4211, Q412-413)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency of CBC at the local level (Q526)</td>
<td>Strong correlation: 1R &gt; 0.50</td>
<td>Medium/strong correlation: 8R &gt; 0.30</td>
<td>Strong correlation: 2R &gt; 0.50</td>
<td>Strong correlation: 4R &gt; 0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits from increasing CBC for the two countries (Q611-612)</td>
<td>Medium correlation: 2R &gt; 0.30</td>
<td>7R &gt; 0.20</td>
<td>Medium correlation: 3R &gt; 0.30</td>
<td>1R &gt; 0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits from increasing CBC for the two border regions (Q613-614)</td>
<td>Medium correlation: 3R &gt; 0.30</td>
<td>5R &gt; 0.20</td>
<td>Medium correlation: 4R &gt; 0.30</td>
<td>7R &gt; 0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 150 in each case study; R is correlation.

Conclusions

Following the empirical analysis, one could conclude that the CBC can be evaluated as relatively more successful in the Estonian-Russian border region than in the Romanian-Moldovan borderland. This conclusion could serve as the basis for further argumentation in determining the relative importance of institutional and historical-cultural context in the Estonian-Russian case study and the increase of economic interaction in the Romanian-Moldovan case study. The benefits from increasing CBC for the two countries and regions are not simply the promotion of institutional frameworks, but they are rather the result of a series of overlapping factors. The institutional context is defined as the establishment of the institutional framework, which is necessary for the proper functioning of CBC, and the level of institutional involvement in CBC, which is also related to the level of institutional effectiveness. The historical-cultural context is defined as the level of cultural and historical awareness and the level of cultural and historical involvement in CBC, which is also related to the level of cultural and historical awareness. The institutional context is defined as the level of institutional framework, which is necessary for the proper functioning of CBC, and the level of institutional involvement in CBC, which is also related to the level of institutional effectiveness. The historical-cultural context is defined as the level of cultural and historical awareness and the level of cultural and historical involvement in CBC, which is also related to the level of cultural and historical awareness.
institutions at different levels of governance, as well as the political context) establish somewhat stronger correlations with indicators for CBC in the Estonian–Russian case study than correlations in the Romanian–Moldovan case study. When it comes to historical-cultural identity, there are profound differences between the two case studies. In the Estonian–Russian case study, indicators for historical-cultural identity establish much weaker correlations with indicators for CBC than in the Romanian–Moldovan case study, where they are also seen as a more important incentive for CBC.

Without the significant supporting basis of the common historical-cultural background, one could assume that actors can initiate institutional change and construct an identity, such as in the case of the Euroregions. The existence of historical-cultural identity may facilitate CBC, providing an additional basis for the CBC actors in the process of identity-building, but it does not appear to be a necessary condition for successful CBC, as the followers of the 'people' approaches in border studies seem to imply. Although in the Romanian–Moldovan case study there exist strong historical-cultural affinities, due to the undeveloped multi-level institutional context and the weakness of the local/regional level (especially in Moldova), there are few opportunities for actors at the local/regional level to mobilize the existing common historical-cultural background into social action, or the actual CBC. Thus, it appears that institutional identity is more important for successful CBC than historical-cultural identity.

While institutions and identity have been studied separately as different aspects of CBC, this paper suggests that the two should be united. The new institutionalism is one of the theoretical approaches that links institutions and identity, where identities are considered endogenous, or shaped and reproduced by existing institutions. This paper suggests that the process of the development of institutional identity takes time, especially where the institutions, such as the Euroregions in the Estonian–Russian and Romanian–Moldovan borderlands, are relatively young. This paper also suggests that where historical-cultural identity exists, it may provide a better ground, or more 'tools' for local/regional actors in the development of institutional or top-down cross-border identity. Yet, there could be no CBC if this historical-cultural identity exists only parallel to the existing institutional context; it needs to be mobilized by the local/regional actors into a cross-border identity. Cross-border identity, like national identity, needs to be constructed and reproduced by political actors and media to be a basis for social action, especially since regional identity is continuously 'pulled away' to the centre, as it essentially competes with the national identities of the two neighbouring countries.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1 The scope of this paper does not allow us to focus on other forms of CBC, such as economic or informal interaction, which would also demand a different theoretical framework and different kinds of data, such as the statistics on exports/imports or on border crossings. Therefore, the main object of study is the more or less institutionalized CBC at local and regional levels.

2 In the Romanian–Moldovan borderland, the in-depth interviews were conducted during the time period of 5–18 July 2004, in Romania's Suceava and Botosani judets, and Moldova's Briceni, Edinet, Rîșcani, Gîlășeni and Falesti raions, all of which are also represented in the Upper-Prut Euroregion. In Estonia, the interviews were conducted in Aug.–Sept. 2004 in Ida-Virumaa, Põlvamaa and Võrumaa—the three counties that have land borders with Russia. In September 2004, the interviews were carried out in the following Russian border regions: Kingisepp and Shalany rayons (Leningrad Oblast), and Pechory and Gdov rayons (Pskov Oblast).

3 While the standardized questionnaires provide the basis for the generalization of perceptions, even if the level of measurement is as high as 1 to 7, these questionnaires alone cannot answer the questions 'why' and 'how'.

4 Although this view was presented clearly in many cases, respondents still were not able to weigh the importance of different levels: "The European level comes first—they launch programmes. At the national level memoranda on funding are signed. Regional and local levels execute projects. I am not sure which is the most important—all are significant" (from the interview with a representative of the Botosani Judet Council).

5 This farmer's view from the Moldovan countryside (Gîlășeni rayon) represents rather typical expectations towards the EU.

6 In Pskov, for example, only 5–6 NGOs have work experience on international projects, and only two or three of them are really visible.


8 The first Estonian–Russian programme for CBC is to be prepared only by 2007 and under the larger framework of the EU New Neighbourhood Programme, which encourages CBC at external EU borders with third countries.

9 From an interview with a representative of the Gdov History Museum, Gdov.

10 Some respondents would argue that "for Estonian politicians, the anti-Russian mood is the best way to gain the political support of the electorate" (interview with a professor at St Petersburg State University).

11 The role of regional representatives of the foreign ministry was reduced some years ago to the simple transferance of local demands to Moscow; they can take decisions only on secondary and largely irrelevant questions (see, e.g. Gavrilov et al., 2004: 202).

12 From an interview with an Estonian representative of the Euroregion 'Pskov-Livena'.

13 This rather contradictory view was presented by a farm owner in the Falesti rayon, arguing that the state has the monopoly over finances and information flows.

14 From an interview with a representative of the Business Centre, Narva.

15 Generally, interviewees on the Estonian side expressed a desire that more powers be given to the local level in such issues as police co-operation, or the reconstruction of the bridge over the Narva river between Narva and Ivanovo, or the opening of the hydrofoil connection between Tartu and Pskov, as well as simplified border crossing.

16 From an interview with an official at the Development Department at Võru municipality.

17 From an interview with a representative of the Botosani Judet Council.

18 In the view of local actors, the European Commission should elaborate more projects on information and education of the population, and the projects should be more publicized: "We live on the border but the exchange between our side and the Romanian one is very limited". The poor involvement of NGOs in CBC may be explained partly by their own inactivity and partly by the limited opportunity structure.
Martinou, H. and Mahakopf, K. (1999), Institutional Aspects of Cross-Border Cooperation, a report carried out by the Association of European Border Regions as part of the LACE-TAP Project, March.

References