
Catalan cross-border spaces in the context of Europe

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border cooperation is one of the instruments used to further European integration, and this is why EU institutions encourage it. Its goal is to promote the creation of functional spaces that are capable of weakening the negative aspects of border effects. A comparison of cross-border integration in different border areas around Europe reveals the weakness of the Catalan space, given that there are no integrated job markets and few everyday spaces (*cross-border bassins de vie* or living/working areas) in this Catalan Cross-border Space. This article addresses three key issues in cross-border cooperation in the Catalan space. The first is about cross-border cooperation spaces in Catalonia within the context of Europe, the second analyses Interreg projects and projects by stakeholders in the Catalan Cross-border Space, and the third highlights the importance of physical connections, which are the foundation of all cooperation.

KEY WORDS

Catalonia; cross-border cooperation; EU regional policy; border region; land transport.

1. Introduction

With the 1659 Treaty of the Pyrenees, part of Catalonia fell under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of France. After that, a border between states was created to separate territories that until then had shared the same language, culture and political and legal organisation. The consolidation of European nation states, with the imposition of different languages, cultures and political and legal organisations on either side of the border, created greater distance between their inhabitants, and even periods—often related to wars—when it was impossible for them to communicate.

IMAGE 1**Milestone at Panissars pass**

SOURCE: Rafael Giménez Capdevila.

When the two states on the Iberian Peninsula, Spain and Portugal, joined the then-European Economic Community in 1986, this helped reverse this trend towards increasing distances. Cross-border cooperation is one of the instruments used to pursue European integration, and this is why EU institutions encourage it. Its goal is to promote the creation of functional spaces that are capable of weakening the negative aspects of border effects. Euroregions, eurodistricts and macroregions all now form part of our geographic vocabulary (Perrin, 2022). Analysing what is happening in our own cross-border space and reporting on the trends and consequences is a relatively innovative exercise in Catalan.

First, however, we should note that a comparison of cross-border integration in different border areas in Europe based on the studies and analyses conducted by the Mission

Opérationnelle Transfrontalière¹ (MOT, 2007) reveals the weakness of the phenomenon in the Catalan space. Even though the activity in regions like Cerdanya/Cerdagne is notable, not only but primarily because of cross-border infrastructures like the hospital and slaughterhouse, the other Catalan border areas have a lower density of cooperation. Aran-Comminges, Andorra-Alt Urgell, Ripollès-Vallespir and Alt Empordà-Roussillon all have more or less formal cooperation structures in place, some of which are just incipient while others are in a more consolidated phase of development, like the País d'Art i d'Història Valls catalanes (Catalan Valleys Land of Art and History), the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC)² and the Eurodistrict of the Catalan Cross-border Area; however, their success to date is quite limited.

In fact, there are no integrated job markets in this Catalan Cross-border Space, with the exception of the one in Andorra and an emerging one in Cerdanya/Cerdagne, driven by the hospital. Beyond these cases, which are merely anecdotal, there are therefore no cross-border *bassins de vie* or everyday living/working areas wherein the border is crossed several times a day to commute to and from work or school or to go shopping or visit family members.

On a larger scale, there are many examples of successful institutional cross-border cooperation, with there being two fully consolidated platforms: the Working Community of the Pyrenees (CTP) and the Pyrenees-Mediterranean Euroregion (EPM).

The CTP, which is commemorating its fortieth anniversary in 2023, has yielded many noteworthy benefits. The first and often most neglected one is the practice of cross-border interregional cooperation, which in the early years stumbled at the actors' lack of experience and the shock between different administrative and political cultures. The second is the arrival of European ERDF funds through the Interreg Spain-France-Andorra Programme (Interreg POCTEFA), which is now in its sixth generation, and the third managed by the CTP. These organisations enable cross-border cooperation at different territorial scales and allow new issues to be dealt with, like climate change, healthcare, youth matters and culture.

The EPM was founded in 2004 and became an EGTC in 2009. Also encompassing the Balearic Islands, it is a large area of cooperation that primarily aims to influence European policies by providing incentives for projects on a variety of fronts, including the environment, culture, innovation, tourism, universities and research.

Without seeking to be exhaustive, this article addresses three key issues with cross-border cooperation in the Catalan space. The first is about cross-border cooperation spaces in Catalonia within the context of Europe, the second analyses Interreg projects and projects by stakeholders in the

1. Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière: <<https://www.espaces-transfrontaliers.org/la-mot/presentation>>

2. European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, EGTC: this legal figure was created by a European regulation in 2006, which was later amended in 2013, and allows for the integration of both public and private organisations from different states.

Catalan Cross-border Space, and the third highlights the importance of physical connections, which are the foundation of all cooperation.

2. Cross-border cooperation spaces in Catalonia within the context of Europe

After the Second World War (or in some cases, like Spain, after the dictatorship), Europe started a process of consolidating regionalised states. Many of the national(istic) claims, which called for recognition and the capacity for self-governance, were successful in building structures designed to work towards social and economic recovery in the postwar years. This process occurred in parallel to the birth of the European Union. Therefore, the state as a political reality coexists with two other political realities, one on a supralocal scale and the other on a regional scale.

The political mood of the time mistrusted states, and regions found the European Union to be an ally for their claims because it defended the principle of subsidiarity and focused on policies that responded to more functional than administrative issues. Within this backdrop, a series of European initiatives started to emerge in the 1980s that sought to advance and consolidate the regional and local 'turn' in Europe, and Catalonia and Barcelona played a prominent role in this game. Jordi Pujol, the president of the Government of Catalonia, saw an opportunity to make Catalonia a European actor, while Pasqual Maragall, the mayor of Barcelona, considered it the chance to make the city a node in the Euro-Mediterranean urban network.

Even though both of them were Europe-leaning, Pujol reflected a political vision of national claims, while Maragall's vision was more territorially and functionally oriented. Pujol focused on the Assembly of European Regions (AER) and the Four Motors for Europe along with Baden-Württemberg, Lombardy and Rhône-Alpes; however, as mayor, Maragall turned to the C6 network of cities and, once he became president of the Government of Catalonia, to the Pyrenees-Mediterranean Euroregion with Aragón, Languedoc-Roussillon, Midi-Pyrénées and the Balearic Islands. Maragall's vision was truly cross-border, comprising a common territory beyond the (physical and political) border of the Pyrenees.

The Euroregion,³ which was created in 2004, is home to all the regions mentioned above. Its institutional headquarters in Barcelona reinforced the city's Euro-Mediterranean role and turned it into the Euroregional 'capital', as it forged bonds with the other cities and border regions. Aspects like research, innovation, higher education, the environment and culture were key issues designed to be addressed jointly.

3. The Pyrenees-Mediterranean Euroregion, <www.euroregio.eu>.

However, from the very start, particular political interests have led this association to mutate and evolve. First, the Region of Valencia, which was then governed by the conservative Partido Popular (People's Party), refused to join because it interpreted it as an attack by regions governed by socialists who were against the model of state advocated by Spain's right. Therefore, the Euroregion has been hobbled since it was founded. Moreover, a few years later, in 2006, Aragón suspended its participation due to its irritation with the Government of Catalonia over the lawsuit on the works of sacred art found in the border region between the two autonomous communities. Therefore, on the southern side, two territories that are part of the same functional region left the working structure.

Nonetheless, in accordance with the new European regulations, a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation was approved in 2009, which meant that it was recognised as a unique legal personality so that it could equip itself with working and financial instruments, such as European territorial cooperation funds. Barcelona became the site of its secretariat-general, thus underscoring its position as a visible leader.

This situation has remained stable, but it is beginning to lose visibility and impetus on the Catalan side. Changes in government, the economic crisis and especially a shifting strategy regarding Catalonia's presence beyond its borders has led its impact to partly wane. The focus has returned once again to a foreign policy that is not necessarily cross-border; for example, a significant number of Government of Catalonia delegations were set up abroad. Once again, functional geography was replaced by the national question.

The biggest shift came after 2016. On the one hand, the changes stemming from the administrative reform promoted by France's president François Hollande meant that Languedoc-Roussillon and Midi-Pyrénées were merged to create the macro-region of Occitanie. On the southern side, Catalonia was plunged into a highly complex, tension-filled political process, and its international expansion around the globe was ratcheted up. In this context, the Occitan presidency of the Euroregion proposed a change to the southern members: shifting all the headquarters to Perpignan. The proposal was accepted. Therefore, since 2017, this city in Roussillon has been the home to the headquarters, located near the high-speed railway line. However, Perpignan is somewhat disconnected from its north, where the tensions between Montpellier and Toulouse are overt, and from its south, which barely looks northward.

Consequently, Barcelona and Catalonia have lost the headquarters of the most important cross-border cooperation structure in which they participate. Even though they remain active in it, this move demonstrates a change in perception of the policy and strategy. The view of cross-border cooperation as advocating for a functional living space where local and regional actors matter and are able to work and act has been replaced by a vision which seeks to emulate a state, even though it is not a state, thus diminishing its ability to influence the needs of the territory.

Another attempt to consolidate a cross-border working and management structure on a smaller scale is the Catalan Cross-border Eurodistrict,⁴ this one between the Pyrénées-Orientales and the province of Girona. It is a living area which in some respects operates on its own momentum, although it has been unable to establish a stable instrument, as has happened in other similar settings, like the Bidasoa River border, some areas between Spain and Portugal and other borders in France.

The borders have never disappeared and are clearly not following a linear process towards gradual erosion. The border effect emerges cyclically. If we add to that a political situation which is also cyclical, coupled with the lack of will, it seems there is no chance of establishing a clear and shared long-term strategy and vision.

3. Analysis of Interreg projects and projects by stakeholders in the Catalan Cross-border Space

Now we will turn our attention to the Interreg projects corresponding to the Catalan Cross-border Space (ESCAT) undertaken in the last three periods (Interreg III, IV and V), comprising a total of 21 years (1999–2021) of partnerships between the actors in this region. We should stress that such a long period of cross-border projects has never been exhaustively analysed, neither for the ESCAT nor for the French-Spanish-Andorran border. The analysis of these projects is grounded on the conviction that long-term cross-border cooperation can have major effects on the development of the territory in terms of both territorialised investment over time and the long-term cooperation among actors on both sides of the border.

The projects analysed have been classified into two main types: the ‘local’ ones and the ‘transversal’ ones. In the former, the participating actors come from either side of the border in the Catalan Cross-border Space, and the target of the study or project is the ESCAT territory itself. In contrast, ‘transversal’ projects have a variety of participants, most of them from the ESCAT territory, and they are usually targeted at generic problems on the French-Spanish-Andorran border. The transversal projects have been classified as grade 1 when there is a considerable presence of actors from the ESCAT and grade 2 when only one partner from one side of the border participates.

In the past 21 years, 554 projects along the entire French-Spanish-Andorran border have been funded, 55 of which can be considered local and fully belonging to the ESCAT, while 50 of them are transversal. The number of projects in each of the three Interreg periods varies, although there was a perceptible decline in 2007–2013 (Table 1).

4. Catalan Cross-border Eurodistrict, <www.eurodistricte.cat>.

TABLE 1

Number and funding of Interreg France-Spain projects 1999–2021

	III 1999–2006	IV 2007–2013	V 2014–2021	Total 21 years
Number of projects (TOTAL)	240	151	163	554
Number of projects (ESCAT LOCAL)	21	16	18	55
Number of projects (ESCAT TRANS1)	5	3	7	15
Number of projects (ESCAT TRANS2)	14	5	16	35
EUR TOTAL PROJECTS (TOTAL)	184,723,877	252,551,272	80.590.999	517,866,148
EUR TOTAL PROJECTS (ESCAT LOCAL)	20,175,670	60,125,443	9.697.595	89,998,708
EUR TOTAL PROJECTS (ESCAT TRANS1)	7,532,394	3,909,642	2.630.014	14,072,050
EUR TOTAL PROJECTS (ESCAT TRANS2)	13,305,101	6,795,340	5.423.849	25,524,290

SOURCE: Authors.

In contrast, the funding of all the projects shows a different trend. In the first period (III, 1999–2006), the local projects received on average almost 1 million euros in funding. In the second period (IV, 2007–2013), the average rose to almost 3.8 million euros, while in the third period (V, 2014–2021), the average dropped considerably to 0.5 million per project. This means that some of the projects in 2007–2013 had a high spending power and, we assume, a significant territorial impact within the ESCAT. In fact, this mainly refers to two major projects: the Xarxa de Cooperació Sanitària de la Cerdanya (Healthcare Cooperation Network of Cerdagne, HTC), funded with 28 million euros, and the Escena Catalana Transfronterera (Catalan Cross-border Stage), worth 14 million euros. These two projects supported two cross-border infrastructures, one related to healthcare (Hospital de Cerdanya) and the other related to culture (programming at two theatres: the Auditori de Girona and the Teatre de l'Arxipèlag in Perpignan).

In addition to these two projects, others with significant budgets were also funded in the earlier Interreg periods analysed (1999–2006 and 2007–2013), most of them linked to setting up cultural, environmental or healthcare infrastructures: joint management of the Querol River (€4.6 m), the Cross-border Health and Social Training and Research Centre (€3.5 m), the Centre of Cultures and Cross-border Cooperation (€3.4 m) and the Museu de l'Exili de la Jonquera (Exile Memorial Museum in La Jonquera) (€3.2 m). In the last period, 2014–2021, the projects were smaller and more transversal.

Regarding the type of projects funded in these past 21 years, the majority are local economic development projects (30 projects, half of which are local). Within the fully local projects, those geared at developing tourist products (river tourism, mountain routes, rail tourism, etc.) and

the health economy (around the Cross-border Hospital) stand out. In contrast, the agrarian and forestry projects tend to be transversal, shared among actors in more varied regions along the border, most likely because they deal with issues that are less specific to the ESCAT (organic farming, urban-rural local farming, food packaging, forestry work, etc.).

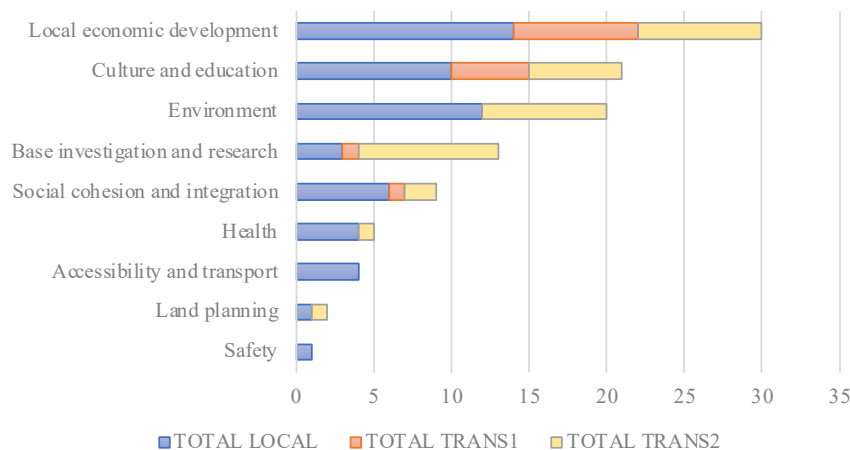
Culture and education projects are the second most important. The local projects revolve around themes or needs that are very specific to the ESCAT, like the Exile Memorial Museum in La Jonquera, the Universitat Catalana d'Estiu (Catalan Summer University), the EuroInstitut Català Transfronterer (Catalan Cross-border Euro-Institute), the heritage of the *Albères* mountains and the art of the Master of Cabestany. The transversal projects have to do with issues that are not specific to the ESCAT, like showcasing cross-border military heritage, traditional music and dance, digital heritage, troubadours, university education and a handful of facilities like the Centre de Cultures i Cooperació Transfronterera (Centre for Cultures and Cross-border Cooperation) in Lleida.

The local environment-related projects include those connected to river and water management: the joint management of the Querol and Segre Rivers and cross-border workshops on water and the management of coastal areas. There are also projects on preventing fires and adapting the ESCAT to the effects of climate change.

The other thematic areas have fewer projects. The basic investigation and research projects affecting the local area are usually targeted at research in food and agriculture, with the exception of the study on the impacts of the high-speed rail. The projects on cohesion and social integration are particularly focused on common cultural and linguistic features on both sides of the border and less about social inclusion. There are only a handful of projects in the field of health, but they have received a great deal of financing (more than €31 m in 21 years). Almost

FIGURE 1

Interreg POCTEFA thematic projects 1999–2021



SOURCE: Authors with figures from POCTEFA

all are linked to the infrastructure and activity of the Cross-border Hospital in Cerdanya/Cerdagne. Regarding accessibility and transport, these projects deal with the implementation of cyclable greenways and general mobility in the ESCAT. Under the category of land planning, there is a project to organise the Catalan Cross-border Space as a Eurodistrict, and in the field of safety there is a cooperation project to predict fires.

In addition to cross-border projects, we should also analyse the actors participating in and leading the projects. Studying them sheds some light on a phenomenon that is usually hard to observe: the network of actors which has been established over all these years of shared projects, specifically those that are the most active agents, the ones with the highest capacity for financing and mobilisation and even those we would expect to find but do not appear in a given project.

The first category of actors are those that lead the projects, called the main beneficiaries. They have special responsibility and therefore special involvement in the projects. Seventy-one actors have led the 105 projects analysed over these 21 years, and some of them have repeated this leadership role and stand out for their dynamism. The most prominent one is the Government of Catalonia (under the guise of its different ministries), which has led a total of 12 projects on a wide range of themes. In second place is the Conseil de Développement du Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée (Pyrenees-Mediterranean Development Council), which has led six projects in the areas of showcasing the local heritage and water management. The Cambra de Comerç, Indústria i Navegació de Girona (Girona Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Navigation) and the Chambre d'Agriculture des Pyrénées-Orientales (Pyrénées-Orientales Chamber of Agriculture) have each led three projects focused on their areas of expertise.

Another approach is to analyse the actors participating in the project consortiums—not the ones that lead them but all the actors that ally with and participate in executing the projects. Here, the analysis becomes more complex because of the extensive number of actors involved: 376 different actors in 21 years of ESCAT projects. However, listing, locating and analysing them can yield a much more complete map of the network of actors in the region and their dynamics. They may participate in many projects, and thus they seem to be very dynamic actors in the territory when pursuing certain objectives, which shows their potential in terms of human resources, financing and interest in cross-border cooperation. Co-financing by the actors, usually around 35 % of the total cost, shows their true involvement in the project.⁵

The actor that has participated in the most projects and has provided far and away the most financing is the Government of Catalonia, albeit with the understanding that this is an umbrella that encompasses the different ministries that have appeared as the entities in charge of the projects. It has led 26 projects with total eligible costs of 26.5 million euros. That is, the Government of Catalonia has co-financed this amount in actions proposed for this territory. It

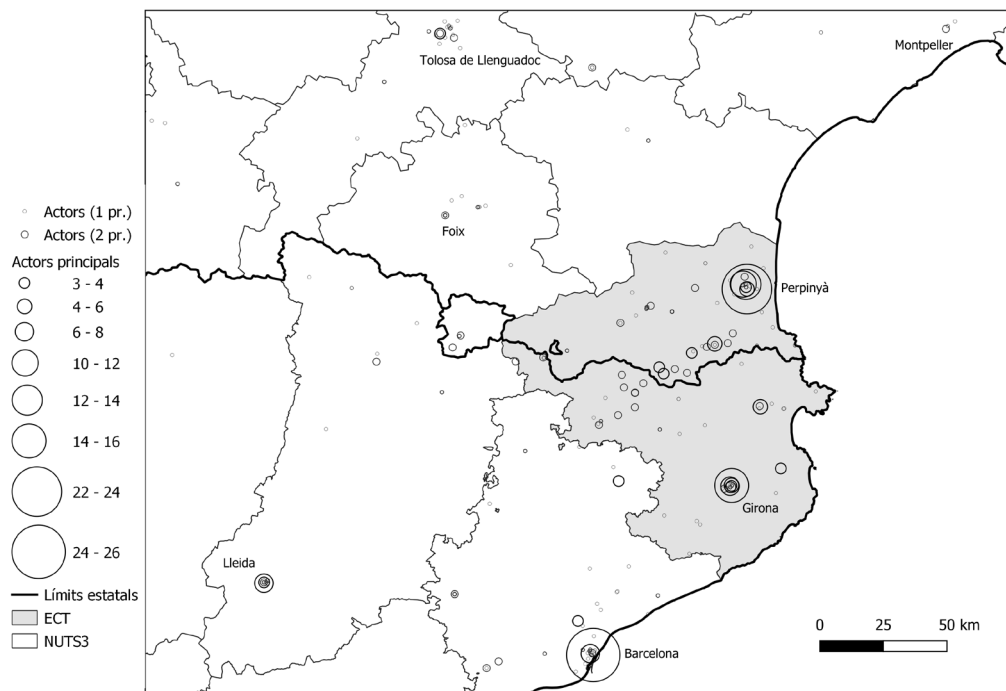
5. We should recall that the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) provides 65 % of the funding for projects in the POCTEFA programme, while the remaining 35 % must be provided by the local actors.

has also participated steadily throughout all three periods analysed, with eight (III, 1999–2006), seven (IV, 2007–2013) and 11 projects (V, 2014–2021).

The Université de Perpignan and the Universitat de Girona (through different departments and institutes) are the next most prominent actors that have participated in the most projects, specifically 23 and 15, respectively, although they provide less funding than government institutions, which have a much greater spending capacity. The prominent presence of these two universities is important due to the specialised knowledge they provide and is understandable given that they are institutions used to working on research and knowledge transfer projects. Another noteworthy actor is the Conseil Départemental des Pyrénées-Orientales (Pyrénées-Orientales Departmental Council), which has participated in 13 projects and manages €4.3 m. It is the most prominent government actor on the northern side of the border, just as the Government of Catalonia is on the southern side. However, the Diputació de Girona (Girona Provincial Council) is not such a prominent actor in the south, as it has only participated in three projects with moderate financing contributions. The Conseil Départemental des Pyrénées-Orientales (11 projects), the Cambra de Comerç, Indústria i Navegació de Girona (7 projects) and the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie des Pyrénées-Orientales (Pyrénées-Orientales Chamber of Commerce and Industry) (5 projects) are all prominent actors that primarily promote projects related to local development.

In addition to analysing the actors, we can also describe where they are or place them on the map to better understand their characteristics. As discussed above, on the northern side the

FIGURE 2 Geographic distribution of the actors involved in Catalan Cross-border Space projects (1999–2021)



SOURCE: Authors.

most active agents in the Catalan Cross-border Space territory are located in Perpignan, which is the home to the Université de Perpignan, the Conseil Départemental des Pyrénées-Orientales and the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie des Pyrénées-Orientales. In addition to Perpignan, there is another area that is fairly dense in actors and cooperation comprised of different towns in Vallespir, such as the headquarters of the Conseil de Développement du Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée (5 projects) in Céret and the town halls of Prats-de-Mollo-la-Preste (4 projects) and Arles (3 projects). Vallespir is also home to other actors with at least two projects, such as the town halls of Serralongue, Saint-Laurent-de-Cerdans, Reynès and Maureillas-las-Illas. There are few actors in Cerdanya/Cerdagne because cooperation there has focused on a single large-scale project, the Cross-border Hospital. Regarding other towns in the department, Prades has participated somewhat intensely with the Universitat Catalana d'Estiu. Also on the northern side, the actors outside the ESCAT are mostly based in Toulouse, like different universities or regional government centres.

On the southern side, within the boundaries of the ESCAT, Girona stands out as the area with the most prominent actors: the Government of Catalonia delegation in Girona (15 projects), the Cambra de Comerç (7), Girona City Hall (5), the Diputació de Girona (3) and the Consorci de les Vies Verdes de Girona (Consortium of Greenways of Girona) (3). The second most active town, far behind Girona, is Figueres, the site of the Consell Comarcal de l'Alt Empordà (Alt Empordà County Council) (5 projects) and Figueres Town Hall (2). Generally speaking, the province of Girona has a very low density of actors, although the county of Ripollès in that province is somewhat of an exception. There are many actors in this county that have participated in at least two POCTEFA projects, such as the town halls of Camprodon, Setcases, Molló, Sant Joan de les Abadesses, Sant Pau de Segúries and Vilallonga de Ter, along with the Mancomunitat Intermunicipal de la Vall de Camprodon and the Consell Comarcal del Ripollès (Ripollès County Council). Others, such as the town halls of Campdevànol and Ripoll, have only participated in one project.

If we examine the actors outside the ESCAT on the southern side, the most prominent one is Barcelona, which is the home of the Government of Catalonia, with all the ministries that have participated in a total of 26 POCTEFA projects. Other important actors include the Universitat de Barcelona (7 projects) and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (4). Lleida is another fairly noteworthy hub because it is somewhat distant from the space being studied, but it has mobilised actors like the Universitat de Lleida (8 projects) and Lleida City Hall (4). Finally, there are cities like Manlleu, which is home to the headquarters of the Consorci del Ter (Ter River Consortium) (3 projects), and Andorra, with the Cambra de Comerç d'Andorra (Andorra Chamber of Commerce), the Universitat d'Andorra, the Institut d'Estudis Andorrans (Institute of Andorran Studies), the Societat Andorrana de Ciències (Andorran Science Society) and the Government of Andorra.

4. A largely impermeable space

People have to know each other and be able to exchange ideas and goods in order to cooperate. One of the first conditions for doing this involves facilitating the physical connections of people and goods, as well as minimising the distances between them through the use of information technologies. Efforts to modernise the road and telecommunications networks are always hindered by state borders, and in the case of the border between France and Spain, this is quite clear given that ideological, administrative and technological reluctances converge there.

The railway system has provided a clear example of this: in the mid-nineteenth century Spain decided on a certain rail gauge and did not change it when most European states chose another common rail gauge shortly afterward. The need to switch trains at the border has held back the economic and social integration of the Iberian Peninsula with the rest of Europe for decades. In fact, the first technically homogeneous cross-border connection was not created until 2010 via the high speed rail line between Vilafant (Figueres) and Soler (Perpignan). Likewise, it is easy to detect the low supply of passenger services along this route, which was limited to just two trains per day and per direction in the first half of 2023 after the COVID pandemic and the rupture of the alliance between the two longstanding state operators, although the number of trains increased to four or five in the second half of the same year. On the other hand, the traditional line through Portbou and Cerbère has lost connectivity, leaving fewer possibilities of cross-border transport. In Cerdanya/Cerdagne, there are even fewer connections between the services on either side of the border.

The road network received a considerable impetus during the last quarter of the twentieth century with the connection of the motorways at La Jonquera and the improvement of the motorways running through Cerdanya/Cerdagne, Andorra and Aran via the construction of different tunnels. Despite this, new border crossings to reduce the distance between the existing ones have not been opened. In any case, the paradigm shift in mobility, in which transport via fossil fuel-powered vehicles is no longer the priority, does not portend an increase in the connectivity of the roadway infrastructures.

Within this context, it was surprising that in January 2021 the French government decided to close several different border crossings to motorised vehicles. Under the pretext of ‘preventing the terrorist threat and fighting illegal immigration’, and alleging a lack of police and military staff to monitor them, the prefect of the department of the Pyrénées-Orientales decreed the temporary closure of the five least-used cross-border road connections: the Banyuls pass in the *Albères* mountains, the bridge over the Major River between Tapis (Maçanet de Cabrenys) and Coustouges, the Manrella pass between the Alt Empordà and Vallespir, the Age Road between *Palau-de-Cerdagne* and Puigcerdà and the Vinyola Road between Enveitg and Puigcerdà, both in Cerdanya/Cerdagne.⁶

6. Préfecture des Pyrénées-Orientales: *Fermeture de certains points de passage autorisés secondaires dans les Pyrénées-Orientales*. 08/01/2021 <<https://www.pyrenees-orientales.gouv.fr/Actualites/Communique-de-presse/Annee-2021/Janvier/fermeture-de-certains-points-de-passage-autorises-secondaires-dans-les-Pyrenees-Orientales>>.

IMAGE 2

Old and new border facilities in Puigcerdà



SOURCE: Rafael Giménez Capdevila.

The measure also affected other French departments and entailed the closure of the motorway through the Portilhon pass between Bossòst (Aran) and Bagnères-de-Luchon, as well as different crossings in Navarra and the Basque Country. The closures were actually physical, obstructing vehicles from continuing with the use of concrete barriers or large rocks.

This measure sparked heated reactions in the towns affected the most because it hindered the everyday lives of their inhabitants, who had to travel further to engage in certain activities. The institutions also protested and sent letters to state authorities. In April 2021, the connection between Maçanet de Cabrenys and Coustouges was unblocked. The opening of the four passes that remain closed seemed imminent in the autumn of that same year, but the measure was renewed for a further six months.

The local concerns reached the European Parliament, where the European Commission (EC) was obliged to respond to a situation in which a member state, France, was potentially violating the Schengen Treaty. The EC issued a reminder that in certain cases states can set up checks on internal EU borders, but without completely interrupting traffic via physical obstacles. The goal is to assess the proportionality of the checks in relation to freedom of movement in each case, and they have to be renewed every six months for up to a maximum of two years. This is

also contained in a judgement from the Court of Justice of the EU⁷ that has been cited in this case, although it originated in a preliminary ruling requested by the Regional Administrative Court of Styria, Austria in August 2020.

The closure of internal Catalan border crossings in 2021 came after other events that contradicted the spirit of Schengen. In 2015, the refugee crisis caused by the war in Syria led to a retreat all around Europe. In 2020, as a strategy to fight the spread of the COVID pandemic, the borders between states (and sometimes internal borders) were turned into protective barriers. This custom of member states reactivating internal EU borders did not prompt a very explicit response from European institutions, which some states have interpreted as tolerance for this type of measure. This explains why France prolonged such an exceptional situation which runs counter to European treaties, namely preventing traffic along certain roads, beyond the regulatory two years.

In late January 2022, traffic was resumed through the Portilhon pass, but the crossings in Cerdanya/Cerdagne and Alt Empordà were still blocked. At occasional protests, groups of residents and activists would remove the obstacles, but the French authorities replaced them within a few hours.

In April 2022, a working board of mayors of Alta Garrotxa-Salines-Vallespir condemned the fact that closing these road connections not only jeopardised territorial cohesion and harmed the economic activity of the border area but also posed a hazard because it prevented emergency vehicles from getting through in a zone where there is a constant risk of forest fires.

In the first few months of 2023, protests at the barriers continued, alongside actions to remove them and the publication of institutional letters and statements. But even now (June 2023), the French government has not decided to remove the obstacles and allow the free movement through all the secondary crossings in Catalonia's internal state border. Negotiations with the Spanish government are being entertained to establish 'mixed brigades' of security forces that would ensure checks along the entire border area.

The episode of closing the secondary border crossings, which comes on the heels of the checks set up during the refugee crisis and the restrictions on the free movement of people due to COVID, is a sign that the European integration process via cross-border cooperation is still facing the prejudices of states that want to hunker down against what they perceive as outside threats. However, the people living in the border areas are the ones who are harmed the most, as they once again witness first-hand how a decision taken far away limits their living space and distances them from the possibility of creating a true cross-border living area in Catalonia.

7. Judgement of the Court of Justice of the EU of 26 April 2022 (language of the proceeding: German), cases C-368/20 and C-369/20. <<https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?mode=DOC&pageIndex=0&docid=258262&part=1&doclang=ES&text=&dir=&occ=first&cid=2822545>>.

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