

Functional areas at the cross-border scale. Lessons for the Western Balkans

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Territorial Cohesion and Place-based Policies in the Western Balkans: an Exchange Programme on Chapter 22 of the EU Acquis

Raffaella Coletti, Luisa Chiodi,
Andrea Filippetti, Filippo Marinoni (Eds)

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9. Functional areas at the cross-border scale. Lessons for the Western Balkans

Erblin Berisha¹

1. Introduction. – 2. The role of cross: border territories. – 3. Functional areas' state of the art. – 4. Programming and managing cross-border areas. – 5. Conclusions. – Further readings.

Abstract: This chapter explores the concept of cross-border functional areas, focusing on their definition, challenges, and management within European territorial cooperation. Functional areas are defined not by administrative boundaries but by shared spatial, economic, and social interactions. As Europe faces increasingly complex territorial dynamics, traditional administrative boundaries often prove insufficient for effective governance. Cross-border cooperation initiatives, particularly under the EU's Interreg programme, have aimed to address these issues by fostering collaboration across national borders. However, the growing recognition of the need for more integrated and flexible governance models has led to the emergence of "cross-border functional areas". These areas are characterised by functional relationships, cooperative stakeholder ties, and governance mechanisms designed to address shared goals or challenges. The paper examines key factors that influence the development of cross-border functional areas in the Western Balkans, including transportation networks, labour markets, environmental resources, and shared socio-economic characteristics. Additionally, it highlights the obstacles that can hinder cross-border functionality in the region, such as historical political divides, economic disparities, and lack of political will. Finally, it briefly reflects on the importance of adopting a functional areas approach in the

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Western Balkans when it comes to implementing cross-border cooperation in a region where cooperation remains challenging.

Keywords: Cross-border functional areas; Territorial cooperation; Governance models; Western Balkans; Integrated territorial development

1. Introduction

The concept of functional areas has become central to discussions about territorial development, especially within the framework of European Union policies aimed at fostering regional cohesion, economic integration, and sustainable growth. Unlike traditional regions defined strictly by administrative boundaries, functional areas are regions shaped by the social, economic, and spatial interactions that occur across these borders². These regions may encompass urban, rural, and even cross-border areas, where interconnected activities create complex, interdependent systems. Understanding and managing these areas requires new governance models and policies that reflect their dynamic nature and transcend conventional territorial boundaries. Cross-border functional areas, in particular, are gaining attention due to their significance in fostering cooperation between neighbouring countries. These areas consist of regions on either side of national borders closely linked by economic ties, transportation networks, environmental issues, or shared cultural and social interactions. In response, the European Union has implemented a range of policy instruments and funding mechanisms to support cross-border cooperation, most notably through the European Territorial Cooperation framework, which includes initiatives such as Interreg³. These programmes aim to

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2. References regarding functional areas see please the work of: Leck & Simon (2018), CEMAT (2017), Juhola (2016), Walsh et al., (2012) and Measham et al., (2011).
 3. References on cross-border and transnational cooperation see for instance of Coletti (2022), Capello, Caragliu, and Frattesi, (2018), Durand and Decoville (2018; 2019); on the Western Balkans and more in general on the Adriatic Ionian Region experience, see the work of Berisha and Nikolov, 2025, Pinnavaia and Berisha (2021); Solly and Berisha (2021).

strengthen regional integration, enhance competitiveness, and address common challenges that affect cross-border functional areas. However, the development and management of cross-border functional areas face significant challenges. Administrative boundaries, political structures, and legal frameworks often do not align with the realities of these interconnected regions. This mismatch can lead to fragmented governance and inefficiencies in policy implementation. Furthermore, disparities in infrastructure, socio-economic conditions, and institutional capacities between neighbouring regions can further complicate efforts to foster meaningful cross-border collaboration. Improving cross-border cooperation is one of the challenges that the Western Balkans are facing. After three decades of transition, the region is experimenting with various cooperation initiatives that are changing the cooperation environment in cross-border areas. This chapter seeks to explore the concept of cross-border functional areas, examining the challenges they face and the opportunities for enhancing their governance and development in the Western Balkans. After this brief introduction, Section 2 discusses the role of cross-border territories in promoting territorial development, focusing on the shift from peripheral to central areas in EU territorial cooperation. Section 3 instead focuses on the peculiar conditions of the Western Balkans, highlighting both the potential and hindering factors that affect cooperation in the region. Section 4 presents the functional areas' state of the art, examining the main theoretical and conceptual trends. It also presents the spatial delimitation issues, while section 5 reflects on the governance aspects, advocating for a place-based approach. Finally, section 6 concludes by highlighting the importance of continued innovation in governance and policy design, as well as the need to ensure that these regions are adequately supported by funding mechanisms and strategic frameworks that promote sustainable and inclusive growth.

2. The role of cross-border territories

Historically, cross-border territories have been perceived as peripheral areas of a country, with their needs and priorities often overlooked. However, with the growing prominence of EU enlargement and integration in the political agenda, these territories have increasingly become hubs of innovation. The necessity of “crossing borders” to facilitate the movement of goods, people, and services has exposed institutional, political, and, at times, cultural challenges. Nevertheless, this situation has served as a testing ground for evolving forms of cooperation across various sectors, including spatial planning and territorial Governance. The primary driver of this transformation is the rising significance of functional areas across borders, facilitated by the gradual opening of national frontiers and efforts to enhance economic, social, and territorial cohesion, as well as solidarity among EU Member States. Despite these advancements, border-related obstacles in the Adriatic-Ionian region, particularly among Western Balkan countries, remain a significant challenge. These challenges stem from political, legal, geographical, economic, and socio-cultural factors, all of which contribute to a complex landscape that hinders seamless integration and collaboration. Among these, political and legal barriers are the most visible. The politically defined nature of borders – marked by unresolved territorial disputes and differing interpretations of border demarcations – has severely restricted the ability of countries in the region to cooperate effectively. For instance, land border disputes between certain nations have created an atmosphere of distrust that continues to limit cross-border initiatives. Additionally, legal frameworks and administrative practice discrepancies result in misalignment across key areas such as healthcare, labour markets, environmental protection, and civil protection. The lack of harmonisation among these systems further complicates efforts to establish coherent policies that would enhance cross-border collaboration. A significant legal hurdle is the varying levels of adherence

to the EU *Acquis Communautaire* – the body of EU law that candidate countries must implement. Legal inconsistencies hinder joint initiatives in critical fields such as water management, waste treatment, and disaster response, which are essential for cross-border resilience. Furthermore, many bilateral agreements between countries remain incomplete or incomplete, further obstructing policy alignment. Geographical barriers also play a crucial role, mainly due to the absence of integrated infrastructure that could facilitate smoother cross-border interactions. In the Western Balkans, for instance, numerous border crossings lack adequate facilities, causing delays and inefficiencies in the movement of people and goods. Socio-cultural obstacles, often deeply rooted in the region's historical legacies, pose significant challenges⁴. Nationalistic narratives, cultural differences, and language barriers create both psychological and practical hindrances to cooperation. In certain cases, these challenges are further intensified by perceptions of historical injustices, which continue to shape relations between neighbouring countries.

3. Cross-border cooperation in the Western Balkans: potentialities and challenges

Potentialities

Despite the numerous challenges, the Western Balkans holds significant potential for cross-border cooperation, particularly as it progresses toward EU integration. These opportunities are primarily rooted in the region's natural resources, cultural heritage, and economic interdependence. The area is rich in environmental assets, including rivers, lakes, forests, and coastal zones, many of which are transboundary. Effective management of these shared resources through cross-border initiatives can yield mul-

4. Zillmer et al. (2021). <https://www.co-plan.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Sabine-Zillmer.pdf>

tiple benefits, including improved water quality, enhanced biodiversity conservation, and increased resilience to climate change. For instance, the joint management of transboundary river basins, such as the Sava or Drin rivers, presents a key opportunity for collaborative efforts in environmental protection and climate adaptation. The region also holds substantial economic potential, particularly in sectors like tourism, agriculture, and energy. Frameworks such as the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative and the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) promote cooperation in areas including sustainable tourism and transport connectivity. In particular, cross-border tourism projects can capitalise on the region's shared cultural and natural heritage, stimulating local economies and fostering stronger people-to-people connections. Additionally, the social and cultural dimensions of cooperation offer promising opportunities for fostering mutual understanding and collaboration. Initiatives aimed at promoting language learning, educational exchanges, and joint cultural events can help dismantle historical and psychological barriers that have traditionally impeded cross-border relations. Programs such as Erasmus+, which facilitate student mobility and academic collaboration, are already contributing to a gradual shift in perceptions, particularly among younger generations in the region⁵.

Challenges

While the potential for cross-border cooperation in the region is evident, several significant challenges remain in realising this potential, particularly in the context of EU integration⁶. One of the primary obstacles is the limited institutional capacity at both local and national levels. Many countries in the Adriatic-Ionian region, especially in the Western Balkans, suffer from administrative fragmentation and resource constraints, which

5. European Commission 2021 - EU-Western Balkan cooperation through Erasmus+

6. European Commission 2021 - Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries

hinder their ability to effectively engage in cross-border cooperation. Local authorities often lack the financial and human resources necessary to implement cross-border projects, and there is a general shortage of skilled professionals capable of managing complex cross-border initiatives. A closely related challenge is the need for better coordination between national governments and local actors. While EU programmes such as Interreg IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) have supported cross-border cooperation, their implementation is often undermined by insufficient coordination among the various stakeholders involved. This lack of alignment extends to policy harmonisation and resource sharing, both of which are essential for effective cross-border governance. Furthermore, ongoing political challenges persist, particularly in regions where unresolved disputes and tensions continue to pose major barriers to cooperation. As previously noted, border disputes – both land and maritime – remain significant obstacles. Additionally, corruption, organised crime, and smuggling are prevalent in certain parts of the region, further undermining efforts to build trust and foster cross-border collaboration. Environmental challenges also represent a growing threat to cross-border cooperation. Climate change is expected to exacerbate existing environmental issues, including water scarcity, flooding, and pollution. The region's shared natural resources, such as transboundary rivers and coastal areas, require coordinated management to mitigate these risks effectively. However, the absence of harmonised legislation and institutional frameworks for environmental governance remains a significant barrier to achieving sustainable cross-border collaboration.

4. Functional areas' state of the art

As outlined in the European Union's Territorial Agenda for 2030, launched in December 2020, Europe consists of diverse territories that vary by their agglomerative nature (urban areas, urban-rural areas, or rural areas), their

geographical position relative to development centres (peripheral, inner, or cross-border areas), and the functional interconnections that evolve. Recognising this diversity presents the EU with challenges not limited to geography but also concerning the emergence, consolidation, and institutionalisation of “non-standard geographies” tied to new developmental flows across the continent. In response, the EU, through programmes like ESPON⁷, has initiated projects designed to address governance and policy needs in these evolving areas. In addition to the EU’s focus, local territories are increasingly rethinking their developmental dynamics from a “functional” perspective. To reflect these interconnections, local administrations are adopting governance models that transcend rigid administrative boundaries, which often hinder their ability to respond to these dynamics⁸. Examples such as intermunicipal cooperation and metropolitan city initiatives are attempts to provide strategic territorial planning that can capture the complexity of local systems while aligning with regional, national, and European frameworks⁹. The concept of functional areas is not new in territorial planning or economic geography studies. Since the early 1990s, research has focused on “gravitational and functional areas”. The functional areas are defined as spaces made up of elements, attributes, and interrelations, which may involve dependence (where one area serves another) or interdependence (where territories share balanced relationships). This concept, adopted by the EU to ensure fairer cohesion policies, gained traction with the 1999 European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP),

7. See www.espon.eu

8. Berisha E., Casavola D., Cotella, G., & Puntillo, E., 2024, Pianificazione di area vasta e programmazione sovralocale: il ptav della Provincia di Ravenna», *TERRITORIO* 104/2023, 120-125, doi: 10.3280/TR2023-104016.

9. Berisha E., & Casavola D., 2024a, «Agire a geografie variabili, opportunità per i territori». *TERRITORIO*, 104 pp. 83-85, Doi: <https://doi.org/10.3280/tr2023-104010>; Berisha E., & Casavola D., 2024b, «Programmazione a geografie variabili: quale ruolo per la pianificazione territoriale?» Atti della XXIV Conferenza Annuale SIU, *Transizioni, giustizia spaziale e progetto di territorio*, Cagliari, 15-16 giugno. Roma-Milano: Planum Publisher. (PDF) *Programmazione a geografie variabili: quale ruolo per la pianificazione territoriale? (researchgate.net)*.

recognising that territories are interconnected beyond administrative borders. The EU and the OECD have since developed quantitative methods to define “urban functional areas” based on distance and commuting patterns¹⁰. This approach promotes territorial development by identifying functional areas that transcend administrative borders, reducing unproductive competition¹¹, and considering spatial and relational interdependencies that are constantly evolving. Administrative boundaries, being rigid, often fail to capture these integrated development opportunities and can even hinder territorial growth¹². Although no definition of a functional area exists, it is described as a region functioning as a unified system politically, socially, or economically. Internal relationships define such areas and often span multiple administrative units linked by economic, communication, or transportation activities. According to the literature, different types of functional areas can be identified depending on the nature and type of functions interlinked (see Figure 1).

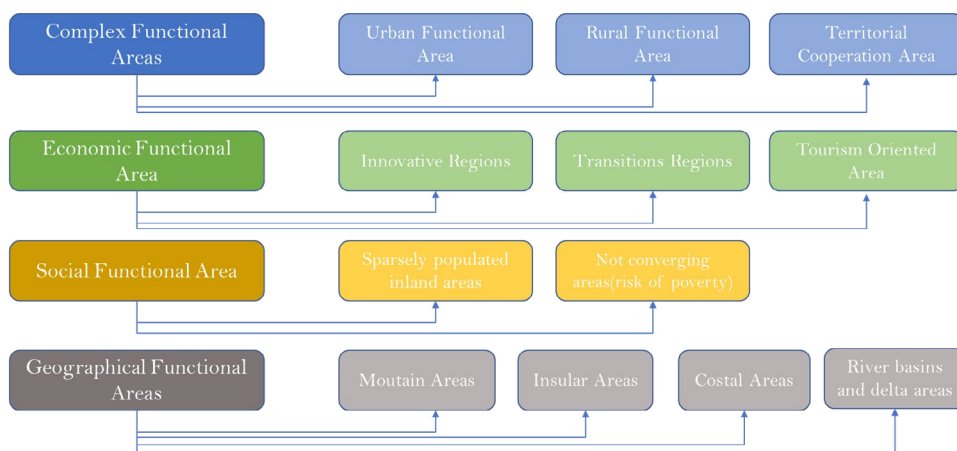


Figure 1 - *Functional Area Matrix* (source: author's own elaboration)

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10. Additional literature on functional urban area are: CEMAT (2017), CEC (2020), OECD (2013, 2019; 2020), Dijkstra, Poelman, and Veneri (2019), Fioretti and Pertoldi (2020).
 11. Cotella G., Berisha E., 2021, «Inter-Municipal Spatial Planning as a Tool to Prevent Small-Town Competition. The Case of the Emilia-Romagna Region». In: *The Routledge Handbook of Small Towns*.
 12. Berisha, E. et al., 2024, op. cit.

Defining functional areas is complex, and this challenge becomes even more significant in areas where administrative and national borders overlap. Cross-border cooperation has been central to various EU and national initiatives, mainly through the Interreg programme, since 1990. This initiative has promoted cooperation beyond borders, transforming them into spaces for joint service planning and governance experiments. However, this approach seems outdated, with a growing need to redefine boundaries for more innovative governance models. The concept of “cross-border functional areas” is gaining traction at the European level, following similar trends seen in urban and rural functional areas¹³. These cross-border areas challenge institutional resistances, advocating for governance models that are sensitive to the needs of border regions and open to cross-national governance experiments¹⁴. Such areas are defined not by administrative boundaries but by functional relationships stemming from shared socio-economic and spatial characteristics, cooperative ties among stakeholders, and governance mechanisms that address common objectives and problems. While these are necessary conditions for defining cross-border functional areas, there are also elements that contribute to creating “dysfunctional” territories. Geographic proximity does not always imply functionality, particularly in regions where political or cultural divides have historically limited connections. Dysfunctional territories can also arise from a lack of political will to foster existing relationships or barriers – whether natural, political, administrative, or economic. Economic barriers, for instance, occur when wealth disparities between neighbouring areas discourage cooperation due to a lack of mutual benefit.

13. Dijkstra, L. and Jacobs-Crisioni, C., (2023) Developing a definition of Functional Rural Areas in the EU, European Commission, JRC135599. JRC Publications Repository - Developing a definition of Functional Rural Areas in the EU (europa.eu).

14. Jakubowski, A., Trykacz K., Studzieniecki, T., & Skibinski, J., 2022, Identifying cross-border functional areas: conceptual background and empirical findings from Polish borderlands, *European Planning Studies*, 30:12, 2433-2455. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1958760> .

5. Programming and managing cross-border areas

While the challenge of defining these areas can be addressed by carefully selecting qualitative and quantitative indicators, the aspects of programming and management present even more complex challenges. The development of these areas is not solely a matter of spatial delineation but also of the governance mechanisms that can be activated. Although not specifically designed for these contexts, the 2021-2027 EU programming period provides valuable insights into local development. Integrated development, as emphasised in the European Cohesion Policy, plays a central role in Policy Objective 5 – A Europe Closer to Citizens – promoting sustainable and integrated development across various territories through local initiatives¹⁵. The European regulation on common provisions for the 2021-2027 funds (Regulation 2021/1060, Article 29) stipulates that territorial strategies must include:

- Identification of the geographical area covered by the strategy;
- Analysis of the development needs and potential of the area, including economic, social, and environmental interconnections.
- Description of the integrated approach to address development needs and realise the area's potential;
- Description of the partnership's involvement in preparing and implementing the strategy.

These strategies should, where possible, be based on the principle of “functional territories”, as confirmed by Regulation 2021/1058 concerning the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund, Article 11. In line with this EU programming, some regions have adopted bottom-up processes to define integrated territorial strategies that contribute to the objectives of Cohesion Policy. Support tools include CLLD (Commu-

15. Cotella G., Berisha E., 2021, «Inter-Municipal Spatial Planning as a Tool to Prevent Small-Town Competition. The Case of the Emilia-Romagna Region». In: The Routledge Handbook of Small Towns (accesso: 12/12/2023).

nity-Led Local Development) and ITI (Integrated Territorial Investments)¹⁶. These tools have also been applied in border contexts, bringing governance and fund management innovations. Similarly, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) were created to facilitate cross-border cooperation. This cooperation is further supported by specific project initiatives funded by cross-border cooperation programmes. However, aside from these formal instruments, numerous cross-border cooperation initiatives emerge from bilateral agreements or bottom-up activities. These initiatives may occasionally form part of long-term strategies to manage shared territorial assets, such as natural resources (e.g., rivers and lakes). Nonetheless, the challenges of delineating “functional relationships” and working (or governing) these areas remain critical issues to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of cross-border functional areas underscores the importance of cooperation between adjacent territories in promoting integrated territorial development, economic cohesion, and social inclusion. The European Union’s experience demonstrates that overcoming administrative and political barriers and adopting innovative governance models can transform border areas from peripheral zones into central spaces for cooperation and growth. However, this process is not without challenges, particularly in contexts marked by historical tensions, institutional disparities, and limited resources, as seen in the Western Balkans. Western Balkans countries can learn several lessons from the European experience and cross-border cooperation programmes, adopting strategies and tools that can facilitate their path toward greater integration.

16. Servillo, L. , & De Bruijn, M._From LEADER to CLLD: The Adoption of the New Fund Opportunities and of Their Local Development Options_European Structural and Investment Funds Journal_Volume 6, Issue 3 (2018)_pp. 223 - 233 - *EStIF - European Structural and Investment Funds Journal: From LEADER to CLLD: The Adoption of the New Fund Opportunities and of Their Local Development Options.*

Here are some key lessons emerging from the analysis:

- Overcoming political and administrative barriers. The integration of the Western Balkans into the EU largely depends on overcoming institutional fragmentation and political resistance that hinder cooperation between border regions. Instruments such as European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) can offer models for more effective and shared governance.
- Adopting a place-based approach. Development strategies should be based on functional areas' specific characteristics and opportunities rather than rigid administrative divisions. Using integrated programming tools, such as Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) and Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI), could strengthen the capacity for managing and enhancing cross-border territories.
- Developing institutional and administrative capacities. Institutional weakness is a significant obstacle to cross-border cooperation in the region. Investing in the training of local administrators, enhancing technical expertise, and establishing stable governance structures is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness of cooperation initiatives.

The integration of cross-border areas in the Western Balkans requires a combination of institutional, financial, and participatory tools, along with strong political will, to overcome existing barriers. Strengthening cross-border cooperation facilitates the EU accession process in relation to the discussion on Chapter 22, which represents a key driver for the region's stability and sustainable development. Adopting a functional area-based approach and innovative governance tools can enable the Western Balkans to address current challenges and transform their border areas into spaces of shared opportunities.

Further readings

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The book presents the results of two projects promoted by Cnr Issirfa and Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa between 2022 and 2024, funded within the “Know-How Exchange” programme managed by the Central European Initiatives and supported by the Italian Fund at the Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The aim of the projects was to support the preparation for the implementation of the EU Regional policy and the Coordination of Structural Instruments as defined in Chapter 22 of the *acquis communautaire* in for Western Balkan countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia). The book has two main aims: first, telling the story of the projects, focusing on their goals, activities and results; second, offering some additional material to the beneficiaries of the courses and to other stakeholders potentially interested in learning more about EU Cohesion Policy, with a focus on the experience of Italy.