

CrossBorder Cooperation and Enterprise Development in the EU's Border Regions: An Evidence from the Case Studies

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Abstract

The article examines cross-border cooperation between organizations engaged in the enterprise sector in the bordering regions across Europe, with the main goal of noting the benefits and obstacles that such cooperation brings to the business sector and regions.

In total, 32 articles that examines empirical case studies from the semi-structured literature review were extracted and presented. The results show that there are eight main groups of factors that have a significant impact on the cross-border cooperation among enterprises, those are: language and sociocultural barriers, perception and attitudes toward neighbours, institutional and legal barriers, weak market conditions and structural limitations, enterprise motivation and benefits, innovation and knowledge transfer, entrepreneurial and social enterprise, and project governance and policy influence.

Keywords: *cross-border cooperation, EU bordering regions, enterprise development, regional development*

JEL: *R1, R58, F550, M130, O18, O20*

Introduction

In the literature, some of the early definitions of the cross-border regions (CBRs) appeared in Prescott (1965) and Grundy-Warr (1997) work, who defined regions in simple words as territorial edges of states, functioning both as dividing lines and as interces linking neighbouring countries. Prescott (1965) emphasized the separation function, while Grundy-Warr (1997) emphasized the interfacing function of the borders. Borders are considered not static, but they evolve and change over time (De Sousa, 2012).

Although they can be understood as social structures that are continually reproducing political, economic, and cultural practices (Albert et al., 2008). Sack (1986) and Popescu (2012) see borders as anthropogenic creations, designed to regulate human activities within defined spatial frameworks. Complex and evolving historical, cultural, political, and geographical processes shape CBRs (Paasi, 1999; Berzi, 2017). Berzi (2017) further emphasizes the role of geographical features and political dynamics, while Jessop (1995) highlights that all these factors have a significant impact on economic development. Regional disparities remain a persistent feature of Central and East European (CEE) countries, where economic development tend to concentrate in core regions while peripheral areas lag in terms of growth and competitiveness (Neszmélyi et al., 2016).

Understanding borders and bordering regions in this way, Scott (2012) states that cross-border co-operation (CBC) involves coordinated actions by territorial communities or authorities from two or more contracting parties to enhance neighbourly relations through formal agreements and joint initiatives. Kurowska-Pysz et al. (2018) agree with De Sousa (2013) that the goal of CBC is to

identify the needs and challenges of local communities in bordering regions and to address them through institutional mechanisms. De Sousa (2012) states that the CBC aims to reduce territorial isolation in the bordering regions by connecting communities culturally and economically.

Basboga (2020) underlines the pivotal function of CBC in stimulating regional economic performance. Chirodea et al. (2017) argue that borders should not merely be seen as restrictive divides but also as potential sources of resources and development opportunities. Along similar line, Chamusca (2024) points out concrete achievements, such as job creation and the encouragement of entrepreneurial activity. Ulijn et.al (2007) address that regional competitiveness is a fundamental aim of CBC, aligned with cohesion policy priorities

According to Batista et al. (2013) and Cividin (2006), CBC can enhance overall quality of life. Batista et al. (2013) further highlight its role in reducing economic inequalities, while Brunet-Jailly (2022) emphasizes improved economic integration. Cividin (2006) additionally notes its capacity to stimulate local regeneration, foster collaboration among organizations, strengthen human resources, and support public authorities to identify challenges. Roper (2007) suggests that CBC also encourages localized learning, which positively influences both business collaboration and social cohesion.

Capello et al. (2017) observe that border regions often share structural characteristics and resources with neighbouring areas, rooted in common historical and cultural backgrounds. These similarities frequently provide the basis for CBC projects. However, Petrović and Ritter (2021) noted that such initiatives are less effective if activities are conducted in isolation on each side of the border, as this undermines regional integration.

Major challenges in Cross-border regions

McCall (2013) notes that the interplay between territory, identity, and borders often affects the integration process. According to Schiff and Winters (2002), obstacles such as political tensions and low levels of mutual trust compound these challenges. Bacsí and Kovács (2006), along with Medeiros (2016), point out the dependence on intergovernmental relations as another limiting factor. The European Commission (2016) stresses the decisive importance of political commitment and the functioning of legal system. Perkmann (2007) and Bufon (2011) further note that governing CBRs is inherently complex because they extend across different national jurisdictions, legal frameworks, and institutional settings. They are usually constrained by complex administrative procedures, making conventional public administration tools insufficient. Similar challenges arise when managing across divergent political and administrative systems, as noted by Beck (2007).

Schiff and Winters (2002) outlined the imbalanced distribution of costs and benefits, the high expenses associated with administrative coordination between the countries involved in the cooperation process, and the greater difficulty of establishing regional agreements compared to national ones, emphasizing that this process requires significant effort and time. According to Telle (2018), political and public administration factors can lead to CBC funds in Central Europe being more likely allocated to address domestic regional development issues rather than international cross-border challenges.

Further, Lundén (2002), Medeiros (2016), the European Commission (2016), and Buda (2017) identify language barriers as a key obstacle to cross-border interaction, alongside cultural differences (OECD, 2024) and issues of identity and autonomy (Bufon, 2011). According to Bacsí and

Kovács (2006), Monfort (2009), Medeiros (2016), and the European Commission (2016), insufficient infrastructure and restricted access to essential public services such as healthcare and higher education further constrain development in these areas.

The AEBR (2014), European Commission (2021), and OECD (2024) emphasize that many border regions are structurally weak, often rural in character, with poorly developed transport network and limited public services. OECD (2024) highlights other structural disadvantages, including weak labour markets, lower productivity, reduced access to economic centres, lower employment rates, weaker GDP performance, limited human capital, and underinvestment. Labour market disparities also one of the unfavourable characteristics of the peripheral regions in CEE, where differences in employment opportunities and economic structure negatively influence regional development processes, as per Habetie et al. (2025). Another significant recurring challenge described in the literature (Jessop, 1995; Scott, 1999; Erkut & Özgen, 2003; AEBR, 2014; Ilić, 2015; Antonescu, 2015) is the peripheral location of many CBRs, which often correlates with underdevelopment and lower socio-economic outcomes. Innovation gaps are also present, as Cooker et al. (2004) note, arising from a lack of innovation capacity and knowledge, a finding further supported by Lepik and Krigul (2014). Lundquist and Tripple (2011), who were focusing particularly on the economic periphery, define CBRs as regions distanced from core national and international markets, emphasising economic proximity.

Materials and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, semi structured literature review to examine CBC between enterprises in European border regions, with the focus on priority area of SME (*Small and medium enterprises*) competitiveness through innovation driven development. The final review included 32 articles (Table 1). Based on the cited sources our research could be considered as representative.

Table 1 List of reviewed empirical casestudies

No.	Author	Region	Focus Area	No.	Author	Region	Foicus Area
1.	Krätke (2002)	Germany–Poland	SME collaboration	17.	Nagy (2020)	Serbia	Partnerships
2.	Nijkamp (1993)	Netherland	Trade Infrastructure	18.	Nave & Franco (2021)	Portugal-Spain	Academia business collaboration
3.	Gualda et al. (2013)	Spain–Portugal	Social networks	19.	Wevers et al. (2020)	France Netherland, Germany, Belgium, UK, Luxembourg	Social Enterprises
4.	Raposo et al. (2014)	Portugal–Spain	SME collaboration	20.	Kuzmin & Kravchenko (2014)	UkraineRomania	SME Growth
5.	Zanger et al. (2008)	Germany–Czech	SME Partnership	21.	Huber (2023)	Austria-CEE	Business collaboraiton
6.	Isakova et al. (2012)	Ukraine	SME Development	22.	Bernaciak (2010)	GermanyPoland	Industry development
7.	Smallbone et al. (2009)	Macedonia–Greece	Textile Industry	23.	Lavrinenko et al. (2015)	LatviaEU	Strategic planning
8.	Bardhoshi et al. (2013)	Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia	Economic, environmental, and tourism dimension	24.	Welter & Smallbone (2008)	Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Poland, Belarus	Business growth
9.	Bufon & Markezlj (2010)	Slovenia	Harmonized development	25.	Neuberger et al. (2023)	Dutch German	Innovation in the agrifood sector
10.	Blondel et al. (2014)	Western Balkan	Economic growth	26.	Neuberger et al. (2021)	Netherland Germany	Innovation

No.	Author	Region	Focus Area	No.	Author	Region	Focus Area
11.	Kurowska-Pysz (2016)	Poland–Czech	Enterprise (Business)	27.	Wevers et al. (2025)	Europe (Euroregions)	Social Enterprise
12.	Dimitrov et al. (2003)	Albania–Greece, Macedonia	Adjacency and Loyalty	28.	Nilsson & Madsen (2007)	Europewide	Agriculture
13.	Zabielska et al. (2021)	Poland	Market Expansion	29.	Knickel et al. (2021)	Dutch	Innovation
14.	Hamiti (2020)	Kosovo–Neighbouring countries	Economic development	30.	Reznikova et al. (2020)	EU	Innovation
15.	Leick (2011)	Germany–Czech	Business Development	31.	Ulijn et al. (2007)	EU	Companies vs. CB projects
16.	Meliá-Martí et al. (2023)	Spain–Portugal	Agriculture cooperation	32.	Petrović & Ritter (2021)	Serbia	CBC projects in the agriculture sector

Source: Authors' elaboration, 2026

Results

The evaluated empirical case studies represent CBC initiatives between enterprises or larger companies in three main European regions: Western Europe (4 articles examining CBC between Spain and Portugal); Central Europe (13 articles, involving Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Dutch, and France); Eastern Europe (encompassing the Balkan countries (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Greece) and Ukraine, in total counting 11 articles); and Europe general, no specific regions (4 articles).

Case studies in Central Europe

Based on the examined articles, as shown by Krätke (2002), there is a reluctance of private firms on the German side to engage in CBC with Polish partners. Even when cooperation does occur, it is often of a low quality. Social factors like a lack of trust and a language barrier hinder business interaction.

A study from Bernaciak (2010) identified benefits from CBC among automotive companies from Germany, where the labour force is fostered from Poland, as such collaboration is cost driven. Analysing CBRs in the Netherlands, Nijkamp (1993) found several key insights. The transnational network infrastructure was not utilized effectively, limiting benefits of border free trade. So, instead of focusing on cross-border trade, businesses primarily concentrated on product specialization. One of the main factors contributing to this issue was the region's frontier positions, which influenced economic dynamics and trade patterns.

Neuberger et al. (2021) identified 35 factors influencing business innovativeness in the Dutch-German border region, grouped into science and knowledge, socio-cultural proximity, accessibility, institutional setup, and governance. They discovered a favourable correlation between cross-border interaction and the accessibility of scientific knowledge. Further, culture, language, and ethnicity are important elements for cross-border integration. While governmental institutions play a crucial role in fostering cross-border relationships, the presence of legal obstacles and different technical (administrative) standards can hinder cross-border collaboration. Although, physical connections between CBRs play an important role; addressing that adequate infrastructure is essential. However, Neuberger et al. (2023) note that in the Dutch-German agri-food sector, socio-cultural differences often hinder innovation. Research based product development can misalign with business

needs, and many innovations fail to reach the market despite strong university collaboration. This reflects the sector's struggle to adopt innovation, contrasting earlier findings. Despite all, Knickel et al. (2021) highlight that the INTERREG program is particularly beneficial for Dutch SMEs' innovation performance.

According to Neuberger et al. (2021), physical connections between CBRs are crucial for infrastructure, whereas Zabielska et al. (2021) indicate that infrastructure poses challenges in the Polish bordering area, and market proximity does not always yield positive effects. They also claim that governmental institutions are seen as an important facilitator of cross-border relationships, despite legal obstacles and different technical standards. Knickel et al. (2021) confirm that differing political priorities and institutional frameworks hinder CBC in the case of Dutch SMEs.

Krätke (2002), authors Neuberger et al. (2021) and Zabielska et al. (2021), in the case of Polish enterprises, confirm that culture, language, and ethnicity are important elements for cross border integration. Zanger et al. (2008) also claim that mindset plays a significant role in the success or failure of CBC between enterprises in Germany and the Czech Republic. Leick (2011) also finds that language and the punctual German mindset impose difficulties in collaboration between Czech and German enterprises, while Knickel et al. (2021) conclude that in the case of Dutch SMEs, networking plays a crucial role as an opportunity to get to know partners' mindsets and business culture. However, to overcome such a barrier, Zanger et al. (2008) suggested several actions, such as organizing seminars, using neutral languages in business communication, learning the partner country's language and culture, and establishing bilingual schools, which can bridge the gap between the nations. Hosting joint seminars can help businesses familiarize themselves with the market.

Kurowska-Pysz (2016) highlights the interdependence between entrepreneurship and CBC. Her research indicates that Polish and Czech enterprises primarily pursue cross-border networking to penetrate market niches and rapidly enhance revenues, rather than emphasizing knowledge exchange or collaborative promotion. Firms note low consumer power in border areas, meaning expansion across the border demands strong competitiveness and direct contacts gained through trade missions, EU projects, and chambers of commerce. Key barriers include the absence of a functional support system for cross-border entrepreneurship, limited market knowledge, currency risks, similar market structures requiring customized products, bureaucracy, and regulatory differences. The author suggests that cluster development could resolve the narrowness of partnerships.

Leick (2011) posits that CBC has the potential to generate both economic and non-economic benefits. These benefits include mitigation of business risks, decreased market competition, product and service diversification, exchange of expertise and technological know-how, improved access to highly skilled labour, expansion into new distribution networks, accelerated market entry, and cost-effective outsourcing options. However, the study also identified several obstacles to CBC. From the perspective of German companies, key barriers included insufficient managerial competencies and a lack of transparency in the partner organization's management structures.

Huber (2023), examining CBC among enterprises from Austria and CEE countries, concluded that companies that have worked with partners before are more likely to build strong business relationships rather than just being physically close to another company. Smaller companies usually do not want to get into too complex partnerships, especially those with shared incentives. On the other hand, companies that are already in production networks are more open to both business and ownership ties. Being far from potential partners makes it less likely that a company will co-operate or enter shared ownership arrangements.

In the case of Latvia, Lavrinenko et al. (2015) found factors that matter to managers' decisions to cooperate with cross-border partners are companies' processes, capabilities, development and

implementation capacities, their goals, business value, and product/service offer. CBC would require the creation of a new model of business cooperation.

Finally, authors Wevers et al. (2020) focus on social enterprises and their role in strengthening relations with local communities in the bordering regions of France and the Netherlands. As per their opinion, CBC supports social inclusion, involving local communities to identify and solve common problems and build trust. Some of the challenges were fulfilling contractual agreements between bordering partners and have high transactional costs.

For better clarity, Table 2 summarizes the benefits and obstacles of examined CBC case studies in Central Europe, categorized into five groups: economic (labour, market and competition, product/service diversification, monetary economy, managerial skills, new models of business operations, (cross-border) partnerships, outsourcing), knowledge and innovation (exchange of expertise, knowledge, know-how, product improvement, research, innovation adoption), social (cultural, ethnical, language, and mindset barriers; trust and social inclusion), institutional/regulatory (legal system, taxation, governmental support, support for the cross-border enterprises, bureaucracy, etc.), and infrastructural (networks, distance, and physical infrastructure).

Table 2 Benefits and obstacles of CBC among enterprises in Central Europe

Category	Benefits of CBC	Obstacles of CBC
Economy	Cost savings via labour mobility, access to new markets, product service diversification, faster entry to the market, reduced competition, skilled labour, and cost saving (outsourced) options.	Currency risks and price volatility; high competitiveness in similar border markets, lack of sustainable partnerships, management skills and business operational models for cross-border enterprises.
Knowledge / Innovation	Exchange of expertise and technological know-how, clustering, joint learning, research based collaboration, and product/service improvement.	Misalignment between research innovations and business needs, and slow adoption of innovations in the agrifood sector.
Social	Enhancing trust and inclusivity, promoting risk sharing and SME resilience, fostering entrepreneurship growth, and promoting social inclusion are crucial in addressing common problems.	Lack of trust, low quality cooperation, language, (business) cultural, ethnical barriers, and mindset differences.
Institutional / Regulatory	Supportive role of the government and EU programs.	Divergent legal systems, taxation, regulations, technical standards, bureaucracy and lack of a functional support system for cross-border enterprises.
Infrastructure		Poor physical infrastructure, underused transnational networks, and physical distance from the partners.

Source: Authors' elaboration, 2026

Case studies in Western Europe (Spain-Portugal)

In the case of Western Europe, the evaluated articles focus solely on collaboration between Spain and Portugal. However, this does not imply that no scientific studies exist on other CBCs in the region.

Gualda et al. (2013) concluded that social networks and regional identity are weak in both countries, Spain and Portugal, where cross-border projects have had a limited impact on social integra-

tion and building their identity. Creating strong social networks in certain CBRs is a complex process that requires carefully planned projects and a strategic approach. As per Meliá-Martí et al. (2023), language barriers and variations in legal or tax frameworks were not perceived as major obstacles, despite their potential complexity.

Raposo et al. (2014) discovered that CBC between Portuguese and Spanish businesses enhances innovation, fortifies supplier relationships, and elevates turnover. The authors recommend that SMEs align their operation with EU free movement principles, prioritize long term strategies orientation over short-term survival approaches, and leverage cross-border market engagement as a more effective risk mitigation strategy than expansion into unfamiliar markets. Similarly, Nave and Franco (2021) highlight the positive outcomes of academic vs. business collaboration in this region, including knowledge exchange, improved patenting expertise, commercialization of research, capacity building, training access, and strong industry demand for university developed technologies. While Meliá-Martí et al. (2023) found that, in the food processing sector, CBC positively impacts workforce skills, as Spanish cooperatives with branches in Portugal employ more highly trained staff. These partnerships also contributed to growth in production and sales performance. However, differences in trade regulations and quality standards posed significant challenges for these cooperatives.

For better clarity, Table 3 summarizes the benefits and obstacles reported in the selected case studies on CBC in Western Europe. Observed benefits and obstacles are grouped in four categories: economy (market, production, labour), knowledge and innovation (access to knowledge, scientific input, innovation in the business, patenting, etc.), social (fostering regional collaboration through INTERREG, limited social networks, trust, language barriers, regional identity), and institutional or organizational (legal and taxation framework, trade and quality regulations, cooperatives).

Table 3 Benefits and Obstacles of CBC among enterprises in Western Europe

Category	Benefits	Obstacles
Economy	Access to markets, reducing business risks compared to entering distant and/or unknown markets.	Different quality standards for goods' export.
Knowledge / Innovation	Enhanced innovation activities, strengthened relationships with suppliers, contribution to turnover growth, exchange of scientific experiences, patenting knowhow, commercial valorisation, and external knowledge access.	Unequal interest in CBC, risk of short-term survival strategies instead of long term strategies.
Social impact	Fostering regional cooperation through CBC projects (INTERREG program).	Weak social networks, limited regional identity, and low impact on social integration and reducing language barriers.
Structural /Organizational	Establishment of cooperative branches across borders, and improvement of the production and skills.	Complex tax/legal frameworks.

Source: Authors' elaboration, 2026

Case studies in Eastern Europe (The Balkan countries, Ukraine)

Isakova et al. (2012) examined the SME sector in Western Ukraine participating in the CBC program and identified three groups of businesses: those that improved their products, enhanced their services, and those that did not achieve major innovations but gained valuable knowledge through participation. Many SMEs discovered more promising markets in neighbouring countries than in their domestic market and found more reliable suppliers through CBC networks. Some entrepreneurs benefited by acquiring better equipment and technologies, developing their businesses more professionally, improving service quality, and expanding their product offerings. Interestingly, some became “accidental innovators,” as their efforts to standardize products for the EU market unexpectedly led to innovation. Initially, they had not planned to enter the EU market, but their participation in the CBC program motivated them to seize this opportunity.

Smallbone et al. (2011) explored CBC between SMEs in the textile manufacturing sector in North Macedonia and Greece, which was essential for Macedonian entrepreneurs to expand to the EU market. Often, it helped reduce export risks and streamline customs procedures, which are particularly complex for North Macedonia as a non-EU country. Before delivering goods to Greece, business must meet specific EU requirements, and CBC played a crucial role in overcoming these challenges. Additional benefits were time saving and improved efficiency, particularly through partnerships with subcontractors from the neighbouring countries. While Dimitrov et al. (2003) examined enterprises in the bordering region of Albania, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece, they concluded that cooperation is driven by adjacency, friction over minorities, and the level of development of partners' countries. Despite these challenges, enterprises demonstrate a greater interest in international cooperation compared to the national. Some certain barriers recorded in the examined regions were unfavourable infrastructure conditions, extensive border crossing regulations, language barriers, the political situation, lack of governmental support, weak financial condition, and demanding trade conditions.

In the case of IPA (*Instruments for Pre-accession*) CBC projects implemented between Kosovo and its neighbouring countries, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, Hamiti (2020) concluded that these projects should place a stronger emphasis on economic development. Although these projects created some job opportunities, their long-term sustainability was questionable. Areas that require improvement include better connectivity and accessibility between border regions, regional specialization, education, social infrastructure, and cultural exchange.

Kuzmin and Kravchenko (2014), exploring CBC among enterprises in Ukraine and Romania, pointed out that such cooperation could ensure that enterprises get better market positions and modernization. This includes the development of production infrastructure, diversification of risks, enhanced opportunities for financial resources, the establishment of common business infrastructure, and the creation of new organizational forms such as holding companies, consortia, strategic alliances, joint ventures, cross-border clusters, or associations. Welter and Smallbone (2008) add that entrepreneurs in Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Poland, and Belarus have better access to resources, technology, and employment through CBC. Trust, shared culture, and visa free border crossing support enterprise growth, especially between Romania and Moldova. However, strict regulations on the movement of certain goods, such as dairy and meat products, between non-EU and EU countries pose challenges. Despite this, some joint ventures have successfully navigated crises through cross-border collaboration with Polish firms.

Bardhoshi (2013), in his paper, states that CBC projects follow a thematic approach. Therefore, the primary focus of cooperation between Serbia and Croatia is economic development. Similarly, in the case of the Slovenia-Austria collaboration, the bordering regions in Austria and Hungary

primarily focus on tourism and environmental protection. The authors did not conduct a thorough investigation into whether the selection of cooperation themes stemmed from the need to address shared problems.

Bufon and Markelj (2010) noted positive and negative impacts coming from the IPA program in bordering regions of Slovenia. Some of the positive effects are bridging countries through partnerships, sharing know-how, targeting common problems, strengthening local economy, eliminating prejudice, raising mutual awareness, empowering local stakeholders to make additional international efforts and represent local needs, and increase cooperation on a vertical level (between organizations from different sectors). Some of the notable weaknesses are setting up goals toward getting political power dominance on the local level, merging institutions that do not have common profile or initiatives, setting up budget inadequately, insufficient personal qualifications, or unfavourable organizational forms of local stakeholders which usually causes competition rather than cooperation model between neighbouring local authorities.

Further, Nagy (2020) specifically analysed IPA CBC project implementation in Serbia. He identified one of the major problems, project partnerships are often established on an ad-hoc basis. However, research institutions, universities, and higher levels of local government typically exhibit a more structured and effective collaboration experience. The outcomes of infrastructure related projects are generally easier to assess, with most having a long-term impact, while approximately half of the implemented projects result in medium term effects. Some projects, despite receiving positive evaluations for funding, showed limited impact on sustainable, long-term development. Partnership dynamics vary during and after project implementation. Not all partnerships are transnational; some are limited to one side of the border. Ultimately, Nagy emphasizes that the effectiveness and long-term impact of CBC projects are strongly influenced by the quality of the partnerships and whether cooperation extends beyond the formal program framework. While Petrović and Ritter (2021) found that partnerships under the IPA Hungary–Serbia program were often weak, implemented individually, and poorly synchronized. Language barriers, insufficient management skills, and a lack of motivation to work together were common problems. Governmental institutions demonstrated some interest in supporting SMEs during project implementation; however, this support ceased once projects were completed. Although cooperation in the form of clusters among agricultural producers exists, more comprehensive guidelines, a strategic approach, and sustained support from higher administrative levels are needed. Furthermore, SMEs require additional assistance in business management, particularly in navigating taxation and legal requirements. Additionally, Blondel et al. (2014) examined CBC between Western Balkan countries and reached the conclusion that in the Serbian-Croatian case, local politics may prevent projects from emerging. However, the situation in North Macedonia and Greece differs significantly. In fact, both countries face serious political and painful relations, but CBC projects have emerged and been implemented without any obstacles.

For clarity, main benefits and obstacles arising from CBC from Eastern Europe are included in Table 4, classified into five groups: economic (markets, labour, partnerships), knowledge and innovation (research, exchange of knowledge, know-how, access to better equipment, improved products/services), societal (political situation, decision making processes, and relations on the local level), and structural/organizational impact (political, identity, language, cultural, trust, prejudice, and awareness).

Table 4 Benefits and Obstacles of CBC among enterprises in Eastern Europe

Category	Benefits	Obstacles
Economy	Expansion to the EU markets, reduced export risks and customs complexity for non-EU SMEs, market diversification, and reliable suppliers' identification.	Unsustainable job creation, market access constrained by strict trade regulations, competition between some local authorities.
Knowledge / Innovation	SMEs improved products/services, knowledge (including "accidental innovation" via EU standardization). Access to scientific knowledge, know-how, and modern equipment, enhanced competitiveness via technology.	Insufficient qualification of local stakeholders, lack of structured cooperations in some projects.
Structural / Organizational	Reduced prejudice, raised mutual awareness, encouraged cultural exchange, trust and shared culture.	Language barriers, minority frictions, lack of shared identity, and political blockages.
Program / Policy impact	IPA motivated more international orientation of local stakeholders. Long term impacts easier to achieve in infrastructural projects.	Goals might get drive by local politics or financial budget, bureaucratic hurdles, political tension, weak government support.

Source: Authors' elaboration, 2026

Case studies in the EU

Authors Wevers et al. (2025), Nilsson and Madsen (2007), Reznikova et al. (2020), and Ulijn et al. (2007) have examined the impact of CBC across the EU from multiple perspectives, including economic (market), knowledge and innovation (innovation ecosystem, education), societal, and structural and policy impact on the business sector. Wevers et al. (2025) focused on the topic of social enterprises and their role in CBC in Euroregions. Authors pointed out that single elements of an ecosystem may help cross-border social entrepreneurship but have a limited impact. The social enterprise ecosystem may exhibit variations across different regions in Europe. Combining several ecosystem's elements is often essential and creates stronger, synergistic effects. This approach boosts innovation value, scales social impact, and supports EU Cohesion Policy goals. Authors Nilsson and Madsen (2007) analysed several cases of CBC between agricultural companies in Europe and concluded that one of the main drivers for cooperation is getting raw materials, export, and improving their business status, while challenges that might arise are socio-cultural differences, different legislations, and production. The impact of collaboration on the development of innovation was evaluated by Reznikova et al. (2020). They emphasized the importance of innovative clusters and their central role in building strong innovation ecosystems by connecting businesses, research, and education. Their success depends on how well the institutional environment supports collaboration and enables a self-sustaining cycle of innovation and commercialization. Ulijn et al. (2007) focused on analysing the impact of cross-border programs and policies on business development. The authors argue that even if a company is not directly interested in territorial policy, it can still be affected by it. As, decisions could be made through programs' activities they might still indirectly influence company's goals, e.g., market access, competitiveness, labour force. or creating opportunities to adjust products and services according to territorial cooperation priorities.

Finally, Table 5 presents the benefits and obstacles identified in the observed CBC examples within the EU.

Table 5 Benefits and Obstacles of CBC among enterprises in Europe

Category	Benefits	Obstacles
Economy	Access to markets, increase competitiveness, better business opportunities.	Socio-cultural differences, different legislations, and production standards.
Knowledge / Innovation	Strengthening innovation ecosystems, connecting businesses, commercialization, research and education.	Success depends heavily on supportive institutional environment.
Social / Regional	Scales social impact.	Single ecosystem elements alone have limited impact.
Structural / Policy impact	Supports EU Cohesion Policy goals. CBC decisions can indirectly help companies align goals with territorial development. Potential to increase competitiveness. Opportunities to upgrade products/services.	Variability of ecosystem structures across regions. Companies may be affected by territorial policies even if not being directly engaged with them.

Source: Authors' elaboration, 2026

Discussion and Conclusions

The assessment of the selected articles reveals eight main factors that hinder cross-border cooperation among diverse businesses across Europe. Those are:

Language and Socio-Cultural Barriers: dominant factors noted by several authors are language and cultural barriers that hinder trust and communication in CBC. Studies such as Krätke (2002), Zanger et al. (2008), and Leick (2011) highlight the role of mistrust, particularly between historically divided regions such as Germany-Poland, and Germany-the Czech Republic. Cultural proximity, shared history, and bilingualism have been shown to facilitate collaboration (Welter & Smallbone, 2008), while their absence leads to weak or failed partnerships (Petrović & Ritter, 2021). Initiatives like joint seminars and bilingual education were proposed to bridge socio-cultural gaps (Zanger et al., 2008).

Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Neighbours: Regional loyalty and perceptions of trustworthiness shape CBC dynamics. Firms may resist collaboration if their partners are perceived as disloyal or if cooperation is considered threatening to existing networks (Dimitrov et al., 2003). In the case of Poland-Czech collaboration, firms prefer a bilateral approach over multilateral, as to avoid conflicts that might arise from collaboration with multiple different partners (Kurowska-Pysz, 2016). At the same time, successful examples come from Spain-Portugal (Raposo et al., 2014) and the Western Balkans (Blondel et al., 2014) which show that cooperative attitudes can transcend political difficulties and historical tension, offering a model for broader multilateral CBC engagement.

Institutional and Legal Barriers: Regulatory divergence, administrative overload, and legal incompatibilities continue to impede effective CBC. Case studies in non-EU contexts (e.g., Macedonia-Greece: Smallbone et al., 2011) and EU member borders (Spain-Portugal: Meliá-Martí et al., 2023) reflect these issues. Firms cite bureaucratic inefficiencies, currency misalignment, complex licensing processes, and different taxation systems as barriers. Recommendations include harmonization of legal standards, mutual recognition of quality and safety certifications, stronger cross-border governance, and structured institutional partnering, e.g., institutions like the Chamber of Commerce (Nagy, 2020).

Weak Market Conditions and Structural Limitations: Infrastructural deficits and difficult trade conditions constrain CBC outcomes, particularly in less developed regions. Weak internal markets, in-

sufficient logistics infrastructure, complex border regulations, proximity, and lack of political support force SMEs to look across borders for better opportunities, as in the cases of Ukraine (Isakova et al., 2012), Poland-Czech (Kurowska-Pysz, 2016), Albania-Greece- North Macedonia (Dimitrov et al., 2003), and Poland (Zabielska et al., 2021). Findings suggest targeted investment in cross-border and business infrastructure, streamlined customs processes, and transport corridors to support SME integration.

Innovation and Knowledge Transfer: CBC can significantly enhance innovation capacity by linking firms to external knowledge, technologies, and R&D institutions. Work by Raposo et al. (2014), Nave and Franco (2021), and Neuberger et al. (2023) illustrate how collaboration with research institutions can drive technological adaptation, product diversification, and patenting. Nonetheless, institutional misalignment and limited commercialization remain as obstacles (see Neuberger et al., 2023, or Knickel et al., 2021). Reznikova et al. (2020) confirm that commercialization is delayed, frequently due to a misalignment between university outputs and business requirements. The authors emphasize the crucial role of clusters, strategic alliances, and intermediary institutions in addressing this gap.

Enterprise Motivation and Benefits: CBC projects enable firms to mitigate risk, reduce production costs, modernize infrastructure, and enter new markets (Nilsson & Madsen, 2007; Kuzmin and Kravchenko, 2014). These are evidences from sectors such as textiles (Smallbone et al., 2009), agrifood (Neuberger et al., 2023), and automotive (Bernaciak, 2010). Nonetheless, success is often linked to firm size and network embeddedness. Unless they receive support from structured networks or previous collaborations, smaller firms typically steer clear of complex partnerships (Hueber, 2023). However, enterprises could benefit from joint ventures and gain reduced export barriers, streamlined operations, and improved competitiveness (Huber, 2023; Leick, 2011).

Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise: CBC fosters entrepreneurship and social enterprise, especially in underdeveloped or marginalized regions. Wevers et al. (2020; 2025) and Welter and Smallbone (2008) emphasize how CBC can stimulate job creation, social inclusion, and local empowerment. Nonetheless, the durability of social outcomes and the incorporation of civil society and entrepreneurs into governance frameworks require further institutional support (Hamit, 2020; Petrović & Ritter, 2021).

Project Governance and Policy Influence: The quality of CBC outcomes is strongly associated with partnership governance and alignment with territorial policy objectives. Ad-hoc partnerships often lack long term coherence (Nagy, 2020), while structured alliances that include academia and public institutions are more likely to yield sustainable outcomes (Litvinenko et al., 2015). Ulijn et al. (2007) stress that aligning enterprise objectives with regional policy and funding priorities enhances strategic fit and competitiveness. Institutional ecosystems and innovation clusters play a critical role in evolving CBC into long term competitiveness (Reznikova et al., 2020).

This synthesis highlights that CBC in enterprise development offers a wide array of benefits, including enhanced innovation, market diversification, risk sharing, business optimization, and regional resilience. However, realizing these benefits consistently requires policy interventions that address systemic barriers such as language and cultural gaps, regulatory fragmentation, weak institutional capacity, and infrastructure deficits. Future CBC programs should prioritize the establishment of structured, multilevel governmental partnerships; provide business mentorship programs and consultancy services to SMEs on cross-border expansion; invest in bilingual and intercultural training; harmonize legal and administrative frameworks between countries; and foster innovation ecosystems by strengthening linkages between academia, industry, and policy institutions. Although the priority of „enhancing enterprise and innovation driven development” is defined under INTERREG, more detailed objectives should be established to guide regions in achieving these goals

effectively and sustainably. At the same time, program managing authorities (e.g., IPA Programme, Interreg Danube Region Programme) should be more actively involved in guiding and empowering local authorities and communities to better support enterprises and foster cross-border cooperation. This also includes raising awareness of mindset, cultural, and historical differences between communities. Our evaluation showed that language barriers, trust, and perceptions of neighbouring countries are common challenges for business cooperation across all examined European regions. Further challenges arise from complex trade and legal regulations, particularly in certain sectors, such as agri-food or trade between EU and non-EU countries.

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