

# Master Thesis

**Belgian-Dutch cross-border governance:**  
the reasons behind low levels of cross-border mobility.



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## **Abstract**

*This master thesis investigates the topic of cross-border governance and cross-border labour mobility in the border area Flanders-Netherlands. This is one of many border regions identified within the EU, which receive additional financing provided through the Interreg program to facilitate the development of the border area and contribute to the goals of Cohesion Policy.*

*Regional governance is different in cross-border areas due to the different environment it has to be organised in. Therefore, this thesis aims to research what the exact differences are, as well as how they can potentially hamper cooperation, and what can be done about it. An analytical framework is presented that is used to assess current state and perspectives of the Belgian-Dutch border region. For the empirical analysis, various documents have been analysed and stakeholder interviews have been conducted. The former will provide a better understanding of the higher government tiers on the cross-border matters in general and in region specifically. The latter will allow to collect more detailed insights and views on the cross-border region from the practitioners on the lower levels of government.*

*This thesis will conclude that, in general, cross-border governance is hard to organise and perform, as it presents many unique challenges rooting from the nature of cross-border cooperation. There are many obstacles which can stay in the way of successful development, and the case of cross-border cooperation in the region of the Belgian-Dutch border is not an exemption. However, opportunities for more deep cooperation and integration are also present and can be seized to promote additional development in the area. Cross-border region development is important not only because it contributes to equal growth and cohesion, but also because such areas play a critical role in the economy and future of the EU.*

**Keywords:** regional governance, cross-border governance, cross-border cooperation, border regions.

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# 1. Introduction

When the COVID pandemic hit, the borders between European countries became apparent again. People living in close proximity to borders typically use the advantages it provides and cross these borders for daily activities. They, however, suffered the most from such change, with the town of Baarle-Hertog-Nassau becoming an ultimate example of how borders can affect people's lives. This town in the south of the Netherlands is a patchwork of 22 Belgian enclaves with 8 Dutch enclaves inside of them. When two nations took different approaches to lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, Dutch people were allowed to be outside and shop in stores (which remained open on the Dutch side), while Belgian citizens were obliged to stay at home with shops on Belgian side being closed. This situation of some places being open while the ones next door are closed became real, going as far as some stores being unable to sell certain products from "Belgian" shelves (Erdbrink, 2020).

Such example perfectly illustrates that borders are still present, despite being invisible, and can introduce challenges despite the EU's intention to remove barriers and limitations between countries to facilitate cooperation and development. Like with Covid regulations, the same logic applies to governance networks and spatial planning, which tend to limit themselves to cities and nations' borders. This might be one of the reasons why the Belgian-Dutch border region still experiences issues when it comes to infrastructure and the labour market (European Commission, 2021), as well as limited cross-border commuting (Broersma, Edzes, & Dijk, 2020), despite all preconditions it has. The research topic of this thesis is therefore the influence of cross-border governance on the commuting between the Flanders and south of the Netherlands.

## 1.1 Background and relevance

To overcome challenges in border regions and promote cross-border cooperation in the EU, Interreg policy is implemented, as a part of the Cohesion Policy from 2000 (European Commission, n.d.-a). The main goal of this policy is to solve common problems in the border regions, therefore allowing them to experience additional growth through smoother cooperation and deeper integration.

Interreg policy is still in place, at the moment of summer 2021 being in the programming stage for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) period 2021-2027 and is expected to be approved by the Commission in January 2022. In October 2020 the Interreg program performance was externally evaluated. Aside from a number of recommendations (mostly related to project-level planning), overall expectations were exceeded, as the projects improved

433 regional development policies and managed to turn “1 euro put in the programme into 2 euros invested in improved policy measures” (Interreg Europe, 2020).

Even with the projects being successful, that does not necessarily mean that negative border effects are eliminated. On the contrary, countries discovered that “*administrative, political, linguistic, but also psychological differences are perceived as lasting barriers despite the implementation of many CBC [cross-border cooperation] projects*” (Reitel, Wassenberg, & Peyrony, 2018, p. 16). So, Interreg as a program can be effective with projects cooperation between member states easier, however, that does not mean the program removes obstacles completely. Moreover, it seems that one of the main ideas behind Interreg today is to share knowledge about policies, which can help to improve strategies for the development in the border regions (Interreg Europe, n.d.-a).

The goal of Cohesion Policy is “to promote and support the ‘overall harmonious development’ of its [EU] Member States and regions” (European Commission, n.d.-b). Moreover, regional policy (as a part of Cohesion Policy) is supposed to allow the EU to stay competitive in the modern world and overcome challenges, such as climate change. This is achieved with more competitive and economically stronger regions. However, there is an untapped economic potential for cooperation development in the border regions, as they “generally perform less well economically than other regions”. For instance, they typically experience higher unemployment levels (Broersma et al., 2020), which is directly related to the main topic of this thesis: cross-border commuting. It is the job of regional policy to improve the situation (lower unemployment and boost economic development), and Interreg, being one of the programs of Cohesion Policy, aims to improve cross-border cooperation (European Commission, n.d.-c).

## 1.2 Problem statement

The main problem analysed in this thesis is a low level of cross-border commuting in the region of the Belgian-Dutch border. Broersma et al. (2020) find that the level of cross-border commuting in the Belgian-Dutch border regions is still low despite all cross-border cooperation efforts. In many cases, it does not even reach 1% of the labour force. Moreover, the European Commission itself, when describing the Belgian-Dutch border at the moment of March 2021, states that:

*“...even after 20 years of free movement of people and goods, and in spite of the common language; the cross-border infrastructure still needs substantial*

*improvement, and the labour market is still fragmented in national segments, with only few coordination instruments or mechanisms” (European Commission, 2021).*

Such coordination issues do not seem to be unique. After examination of cooperation in six Austrian border regions, Deppisch (2012) concludes that only two of them can be seen as successful. The other four cooperations executed minimal required effort to receive Interreg funding for mutually beneficial projects, showing no interest in actual conflict resolution over controversial topics. Next, Durand (2014) studies metropolitan areas on the Belgian-French border and greater Luxemburg. Those are cross-border cooperations between Western European Countries, one of the founders of the EU. Thus, it is reasonable to assume programs perform efficiently in such cases compared to new members, for example. However, it is crucial to mention that Durand finds that over 20 years 80% of Interreg A developments are study or PR projects (in the selected cases). This is a critical nuance; concrete planning constitutes only 15%, which raises the question of what is the rationale is behind such distribution.

Deppisch (2012) states that economic disparities between Bavaria and Austrian regions are one of the reasons that hinder actors’ willingness to cooperate, even in places with favourable historic and cultural preconditions. However, according to Svensson & Balogh (2018), language is a key factor that has a negative impact on cross-border coordination. It receives significantly less attention from European stakeholders, who mostly focus on regulatory obstacles. As was already mentioned, among the other topics, Cohesion Policy is supposed to address economic disparities. However, almost no citizens see them as a problem that prevents cooperation. Instead, practically all countries name language as the single most important obstacle preventing cross-border interaction.

That is what makes the case of the Belgian-Dutch border worthy of attention. Major obstacle in the form of linguistic barrier does not exist there. Economic disparities are slight as well. So, the question arises, why does the European Commission still indicate this region as having not much progress? Why is the number of cross-border commuters still very low? Are there other yet unknown forces that hinder cooperation in the region?

Before moving on to the research questions section, it is worth mentioning that the Interreg program may lack a self-critical attitude. As was mentioned above, an external evaluation found the program to be very effective with results exceeding expectations. Nevertheless, the first “Cross-border review” aimed to identify obstacles in border regions (and proposals to overcome them) was conducted by the European Commission (EC) itself in 2015,

with results being published in 2017. So, even if the Interreg program itself showed good results in the 2020 evaluation, until 2017 the EC likely was not aware of what exactly the typical issues are. Combined with the mentioned cases from Deppisch and comments from the EC, the 2020 evaluation of Interreg effectiveness is confusing, for lack of a better word.

The case of Belgian-Dutch border researched in this thesis can serve as a useful ex-post evaluation of how cross-border governance and spatial planning were conducted and help to answer the question of why cross-border commuting numbers are low. In this case study the main aim is to see the obstacles that prevent commuting in the region, which (a) has a long history of cross-border interaction, (b) has economic and cultural preconditions for cooperation development. It is worth investigating in detail what are the reasons for unsatisfactory results in the case of the Belgian-Dutch border and how cross-border governance works in such cases.

### 1.3 Research objectives and questions

The main objective of this thesis is to find the reasons behind low levels of cross-border commuting between Belgium and the Netherlands despite all favourable preconditions existing there, as well as to analyse what can be done to improve cross-border labour mobility in the selected region. This aim is achieved by closely studying the cross-border integrations in the EU in general, and between Belgium and the Netherlands in particular.

The main research question of the thesis used to achieve the aim stated above is:

*How cross-border setting of regional governance complicates development of cross-border labour mobility between Belgium and the Netherlands?*

In order to answer the main research question, several sub-questions have been formulated.

The first step is to understand why the level of cross-border commuting is low in the first place. This is done by analysing existing literature to gather information about known and documented issues both for cross-border cooperation in the EU, as well as in the selected case region of the Belgian-Dutch border. After that it is necessary to know what has been proposed to overcome these obstacles, which includes both a review of the EU-related policies and actions and work by scholars on the topic. Additionally, information on both topics can be gained via the interviews with the stakeholders. Therefore, the following sub-questions can be formulated:

- What are the currently known obstacles preventing cross-border cooperation in general and in the selected case?
- What are the perceived opportunities for cross-border development in general and in the selected commuting case?

Next, the selected case is analysed in detail in order to understand how regional governance differs in cross-border areas:

- What is specific to regional governance in the cross-border areas?

Finally, after knowing all opportunities and obstacles it will be possible to answer the following final question:

- What can be done to improve cross-border labour mobility in the Belgian-Dutch region?

#### 1.4 Relevance

This topic is important and relevant for several reasons. First, cross-border collaboration programs are part of Cohesion Policy in general, as it currently constitutes a large portion of the EU budget spending, 61,5 billion euros for the last MFF period. European Regional Development Fund is even larger: 219,8 billion euros. (European Commission, n.d.-d). It is important to ensure efficient allocation of those funds. Second, the topic is relevant because the borders in the EU are relatively populated: one-third of the EU population lives in border regions (under the Interreg program), and half of the population crosses a border at least several times per year (European Commission, n.d.-e). Third, this population subsequently produces around 30% of the EU GDP. At the same time, as was already mentioned, border regions are typically economically less developed and have weaker performance in general, e.g., suffering from higher unemployment rates (European Commission, 2017). Overall, it means that all those people are dependent on the efficient execution of cross-border governance and related policies, and what happens there influences the whole EU. Finally, free movement of labour is one of the four EU-defining freedoms. However, barriers still can be in place and prevent free movement of labour between member states. This freedom is arguably even more important for people living close to the borders between EU states, so obstacles hindering it should be identified.

Broersma et al. (2020) state that economic performance can be improved with more cross-border cooperation and interaction, which means that more cross-border commuting is essential for economic development.

This thesis is scientifically relevant because, although there is consensus that the EU needs more cross-border cooperation to yield better results from the Cohesion Policy (to be more competitive and bridge the gaps between regions), so far “*empirical evidence is scarce and little is known about the actual influence of cross-border obstacles on hindering commuting*” (Broersma et al., 2020. p. 2, from Edzes, van Dijk and Venhorst 2018). The EC itself notices that gathering information about such obstacles is necessary to resolve them. (European Commission, 2017).

Thus, this thesis will contribute to the understanding of obstacles that prevent cross-border commuting and collaboration in general, as well as contribute to the discussion on regional and cross-border governance in a more broad sense. It is important to note, however, that in this work cross-border governance is treated as a specific case of regional governance. More details can be found in the literature review chapter.

## 1.5 Structure

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows: chapter 2 features a literature review on the theory and the most relevant papers on the topic being covered. It is followed by the methodology in chapter 3. This chapter justifies the choice of the document analysis combined with the conducted interviews. The advantages and disadvantages of the research strategy are described here as well. The choice of interviewees and documents for analysis is justified further in chapter 3, as well as how the interviews are conducted and evaluated. Chapter 4 then presents the description of the case with practical matters. After that, the results are given in chapter 5, where the interview outcomes are described alongside the document analysis. They are also discussed using the lens of analytical framework. Finally, chapter 6 is devoted to conclusions and discussion thereof, where the sub-questions and the main research question are answered, and the potential applicability of the research, as well as further possible developments on the topic are described. An appendix with the transcripts of the interviews and a reference list are included at the end of the document.

## 2. Literature review

In this chapter, the related literature on the topic will be reviewed. To answer the main research question and the following sub-questions, it is necessary to review and discuss some theoretical concepts. It seems that the majority of the literature to be reviewed should not date earlier than the 1990s, as many EU policies date back to that period. The discussion on and the term of governance itself also appeared at the end of the previous century. Thus, academic reflections within this timeframe should be most relevant.

### 2.1 Regional governance

#### 2.1.1 Establishing definition

It is of crucial importance to mention that in this thesis cross-border governance in the Belgian-Dutch border region is viewed as a specific case of regional governance. To that end, a definition of regional governance is established. However, the latter may be somewhat problematic since there is no universally agreed definition of regional governance. Deppisch states that there is some difficulty with the clear establishment of what cross-border governance actually is:

*Although the term 'cross-border governance' is increasingly used in the literature, a systematic theoretical approach is lacking. Reference is often made to different theoretical perspectives, depending on the author's disciplinary background. ... This leads to the impression that cross-border governance is used as a catch-phrase rather than as a theoretically well-founded term. (Deppisch 2012, p. 317-318)*

As will be shown in the coming paragraphs, that is true to some extent. For instance, European Parliamentary Research Service takes a rather simple approach to the definition of regional governance: “...rules, procedures and practices used by institutions at regional level” (Widuto, 2018, p. 2). However, this definition is only applicable for internal use, as it is not universal and very context-dependent, for instance, it excludes non-institutional stakeholders.

Still, in this thesis the following definition of regional governance is used: *it is vertical and horizontal coordination of actions of public and private stakeholders in multi-jurisdiction environments*. The next section includes reasoning for specific traits associated with regional governance, which can be listed as:

- Multi-jurisdiction environments

- Vertical and horizontal coordination
- Public and private stakeholders

To justify the definition of regional governance, first, it is worth listing and analysing the features of governance itself. Generally, it is logical that regional governance would resemble qualities of governance but in connection with regional development. Regional governance should at least include *horizontal coordination of actions* and inclusion of both *private and public stakeholders*, as those are traits inherited from governance itself (Jessop 1998; Jordan 2008; Lu & Jacobs 2013; Rhodes 2007; Swyngedouw 2005).

To be more precise, Swyngedouw defines governance as “...*institutional or quasi-institutional arrangements ... organised as horizontal associational networks of private (market), civil society (usually NGO) and state actors*” (2005, p. 2001). The work of Rhodes (2007) also falls in line with it, calling governance a new way, or method, of governing to the changed rules and environment, in particular, the inclusion of non-state actors (i.e., private stakeholder), the interdependence of organizations and their continuous interactions: governance through networks (i.e., horizontal coordination). In the article of Jessop (1998), governance is also referred to as a self-organizing interpersonal network, with inter-organizational coordination and decentralized steering. Even though Lu & Jacobs (2013) call governance definition “slippery” as different scholars imply different meanings, their article still confirms the aforementioned. They define governance as “*a variety of horizontal, place-based, collaborative decision-making practices by a broad spectrum of people, private groups, and public organizations*” (Lu & Jacobs, 2013, p. 80). Jordan (2008) as well states that the term “governance” is often used “loosely”, however as one of the key differences from “government” he mentions the possibility to involve non-state actors in the analysis of societal steering.

However, in addition to the governance traits highlighted in the previous paragraphs, regional governance should also operate on the regional level. Schmitt & Wiechmann (2018) and Straalen & Witte (2018) confirm that key characteristics for the regional governance include coordination of collective actions (i.e., network of stakeholders, as was already established), and, more importantly, relation to the regional level. Böcher as well sees regional governance as a continuation of governance but in the domain of regional policy. The author defines it as “*a set of new and different modes of governance, which together constitute new ways of doing regional policy and which are able to support regional development more effectively*” (Böcher, 2008, p. 373).

Foster & Barnes also mention the relation of regional governance to the regional level, defining it “*as deliberate efforts by multiple actors to achieve goals in multi-jurisdiction environments*” (Foster & Barnes, 2012, p. 273). This concise definition can even be considered elegant, as it implies that both private and public stakeholders are working together, and that does not necessarily mean that they have the same agenda.

The work of Willi, Pütz, & Müller (2018) specifically takes an in-depth look at the definition of regional governance. The most basic definition is already more encompassing than the one in the work of Foster & Barnes and described as “*complex mechanisms of development processes which are coordinated by private and public actors that represent different political levels, jurisdictions and economic sectors*” (Willi et al., 2018, p. 2). However, authors see an issue with this definition in the fact that even the broadest definition is not universal across literature and practitioners. Again, it hugely depends on the context. In the end, they arrive at, what they believe is, a universal definition of regional governance: “*the vertical and horizontal coordination of regional transformation processes beyond administrative boundaries by state and non-state actors*” (Willi et al., 2018, p. 16). As it can be seen, it indeed can be called universal as it includes all characteristics of regional governance used to define it in this thesis.

Jordan (2008) states that the term “governance” can carry two meanings: either theoretical/analytical or empirical. Willi et al. (2018) also highlight the ambiguity of the term “regional governance”. In their in-depth study, authors also conclude there are several types of how the term “regional governance” can be used:

**The first type** is a theoretical concept. It highlights the importance of coordination in the development of the regions, including state and non-state actors, with different interests and priorities. Authors refer to the works of Bevir (2011), Fürst (2014), Kleinfeld (2006), Mose et al. (2014), Tolkki et al. (2011) as good examples of that.

**The second type** is a usage of a term for describing the growing importance of non-state stakeholders and delegating of responsibilities that used to belong to one state actor. This includes the previously mentioned Swyngedouw (2005), Rhodes (2007), Jessop (1997). Willi et al. also mention the works of Bulkeley (2005) and Zimmermann (2009).

**The third type** is an idea of regional governance as an approach, a mechanism to improve the development of the region because of all benefits it brings. Aside from the previously mentioned Jordan (2008) and Lu & Jacobs (2013); Willi et al. also mention Meadowcroft (2007) and Morrison (2014) as an example. It is the closest approach to practice, where “*regional governance is commonly understood as a tool to foster sustainable development,*

*strengthen collective decision-making processes and meet policy goals*” (Willi et al., 2018, p. 2).

### 2.1.2. Cross-border governance: a type of regional governance

As it can be seen from the previous section, evidently, cross-border governance also falls into the established definition of regional governance. It is by nature interacts with at least two states, so it is multi-jurisdictional and goes beyond administrative boundaries. Next, it requires both vertical and horizontal coordination in order to implement cross-border projects. Finally, of course, regional governance also includes both state and non-state actors. So, in this thesis viewing cross-border governance as a specific case of regional governance is seen as relevant. It is also worth mentioning, that in their work Willi et al. (2018) derive “spatial modes of governance”, which include “urban”, “territorial”, “rural”, and “landscape” aside from “cross-border” one, which only confirms the idea that cross-border governance can be seen as a specific case of regional governance.

One may ask, what is so specific that differentiates cross-border governance from regional governance? The answer is the immensely increased complexity of administrative environments. For example, in the case of cross-border governance for the selected case of the Belgian-Dutch border, it is not just the interests of the municipality versus the interests of the province. Municipalities might have opposite interests and goals in general, and that can be further complicated by the fact that they belong to completely different political systems in different countries with the addition of other supranational complexities. This will be studied in detail in the following chapters.

## 2.2 Cross-border collaborations in the EU: academic perspective

Before discussing the organization of cross-border collaboration in the EU and how it evolved over the years, it is worth starting with inputs from academia that are directly or marginally related towards the European policy state on this subject. In general, the idea of the EU as a cooperation facilitator is widely accepted, however, academic reflections point out some unresolved issues associated with it. In this section, four different types of academic reflections will be reviewed.

### 2.2.1 Absence of cross-border jurisdictions

To begin with, an interesting idea can be found in the work of Decoville & Durand (2017): they state that cross-border cooperation documents in the EU cannot be seen as spatial planning documents since such phenomenon as cross-border jurisdiction does not exist. As “*spatial planning remains totally embedded in national and regional contexts*” (), planners more and more need to work with cross-border cooperation in mind, while the concrete planning (“including activities, politics, and governance”) stays limited by administrative and state borders (Decoville & Durand, 2017, from Paasi and Zimmerbauer, 2015).

The same idea was expressed in the work by Dühr, Stead & Zonneveld (2007), where the authors provide an extensive overview of spatial planning in the EU. It has been a long-lasting trend of the EU gaining influence in all spheres, spatial planning included, initiatives concerning coordination of spatial policies were supported. However, the most important part is the authors claiming that there is no “*clear institutional and political framework for European spatial planning [at EU level]*” (Dühr et al., 2007, p. 295). Member states were responsible for it, and cross-border cooperation depended on them on all levels of government. Despite the implementation of many cross-border projects, the existence of borders is still a limiting factor: cross-border dimension is not taken into account in planning documents.

Turning to more recent studies, Durand concludes that “*European operational programmes defined by the European regional policy currently form more of a collection of cross-border projects than a genuinely concerted cross-border strategy*” (Durand, 2014, p.127). Again, there is no clear framework for European spatial planning despite many implemented projects. The author concludes that there is a need for adjustments and innovations to make CBSP work. Jacobs highlights the same issue. Practically, following a legal framework is problematic when it comes to cross-border spatial planning due to the non-existence of it, “*doubling the complexity of spatial planning*” (Jacobs, 2014, abstract). Reimer.,

Getimis & Blotevogel (2014, p. 7) come to the same conclusion: even though the EU governance agenda had a substantial influence on the transformation of planning, it didn't lead to harmonization of planning systems in member states.

Dühr, Colomb & Nadin (2010) state that coordination of spatial planning documents and actions of stakeholders are both critical for success. Durand brings up an example of cooperation in the Lille metropolitan area (Franco-Belgian border region) and the greater Luxemburg area. There the cross-border regions were institutionalized to deal with different planning systems, which allowed "to frame governance" (Durand, 2014, p. 121) and implement cross-border actions. However, a low degree of institutionalisation is a common state for cross-border cooperation, according to Gomez; moreover, he also mentions that "...*the process of institutional construction in the Franco-Belgian zone as "fragile and unfinished"*" (Gomez, 2016, p. 38).

### 2.2.2 Cohesion policy

In light of the discussion of Cohesion Policy, Dühr concludes that it was more effective in the institutionalized trans-national regions compared to "bottom-up" structures. She argues that the added value of a policy will depend not on the Interreg funds but "*whether hard choices can be made in the coming years to achieve a more coherent approach to transnational cooperation and corresponding regions*" (Dühr, 2018, p. 566).

Demeterova, Fischer & Schmude (2020) research the topic of spatial justice and indicate that European territorial policies "*seem to be more about resource distribution than actual spatial organization and planning*" (Demeterova et al., 2020, p.19). That, however, seems to line up with the description of the Interreg program on its website: the main support it provides is networking, learning platform (peer learning, policy advice and recommendations), and co-financing of projects (Interreg Europe, n.d.-a). Authors conclude that more linkage with regional planning is needed, so they can work together, instead of parallel to each other.

Gomez (2016) briefly mentions administrative, institutional, political, fiscal, and legislative differences between member states as obstacles that might prevent cooperation (which will be reviewed in the following section). Interestingly, however, the author emphasises the importance of the EU in the process, stating that "*while they [differences] were not evened out by the European integration process, local decision-makers are not able to eradicate them*" (Gomez, 2016, p. 38). Thus, some obstacles just cannot be resolved locally and need to be addressed on a higher level.

Talking about Cohesion policy in general, despite being “*the cement that holds the construction of the EU together*’ ... [it] seems to have lost some of its importance and attractiveness” (Zaucha & Böhme, 2020, p. 627). As the authors argue, it needs more evidence-based support to show its effectiveness. This might be a possible explanation why “communication or public relation actions” constitutes 25% of total spending in the selected cases, according to Durand (2014).

Deppisch also warns that influence on the agenda can work both ways. Cross-border cooperation is a topic of great importance; thus, it can trigger different external and internal effects. For example, border regions can try to influence other levels, either national or the EU, in order to give more priority to their own interests (Deppisch, 2012), albeit the examples of that were not provided.

### 2.2.3 Territoriality

In the context of the discussion of EU regional collaboration, it is of crucial importance to mention the concept of territoriality. Andreas Faludi (2016) defines territoriality as an idea that control of national territories is cemented within the notion of a sovereign state. Again, this concept is crucial for the regional policy of the EU. Faludi states that “*achievement of territorial cohesion in Europe is deeply problematic due to the territoriality of EU member states*” (Faludi, 2016, p.303). Countries prioritize their control over a territory over cross-border interactions, and the nature of the EU recognizes such right and supremacy of nation states, “*potentially dooming the very concept of EU territorial cohesion to failure*” (Faludi, 2016, p. 310). This ‘hard space’ approach is the opposite of ‘soft space’, which requires a different, defused view of borders and sovereignty. The author believes that deeper cooperation can be achieved because EU policies that overlap borders make stakeholders “*to assume new identities in the process*” (Faludi, 2016, p.310), creating such soft spaces.

### 2.2.4 Soft spaces

The concept of “soft spaces” is important in the context of cross-border collaboration in the EU. As it can be seen from the previous paragraphs, many authors advocate for the creation of some kind of rigid framework in order to make cross-border cooperation more efficient.

Many academics practically refer to the idea of soft space, even if they do not necessarily call it by the name. Stead defines soft spaces as “*regions in which strategy is made between or alongside formal institutions and processes*” (Stead, 2013, p. 685). It is both a definition of working outside of rigid administrative borders as well as an introduction of informality in the

process of planning. During the process of cross-border spatial planning, actors face a number of challenges, and since there is no solid institutional and political framework in the EU, every case of cross-border cooperation creates such a soft space of ambiguity. A project can span across different multi-annual EU budgets, during which the governments in both countries can change, acting along with national planning regulations, with a potential conflict of interests between private stakeholders. It is easy to imagine that such an environment has informality and a lack of transparency.

### 2.3 The functioning of cross-border cooperation

Cross-border cooperation was funded by the EU via Interreg since 1990 (Broersma et al., 2020). Between 2007 and 2020, sixty Interreg A programs were in place. Each program is collaboratively managed by a 'joint structure', that is based in one of the countries, which is also held responsible for the projects. The program also mentions the problems of trust-building since some of the neighbours used to be foes in the past. More than 6000 projects were realised during the period of 2007-2013 alone.

An increase in cross-border labour mobility has been considered a way to achieve a better economic state of the EU even back in 2001 (van Houtum & van Der Velde, 2003). From the EU viewpoint, cross-border spatial planning was and still remains necessary as the program continues to exist in the new MFF. This should not be surprising, as the principles of cross-border cooperation and development are in line with Regional Policy goals. Not only that, Zaucha & Böhme, (2020) also mention that scholars studying EU "share a deep conviction" about the importance of regional policy and cohesion in general. Regional policy (sometimes referred to as Cohesion policy) is a very important and large policy of the EU. The idea of cohesion first appeared in 1986 in the Single European Act with the goal of "*reducing disparities between the various regions and the backwardness of the least-favoured regions*" (European Commission, n.d.-f). To this day, it is the main investment policy of the EU, constituting 355,1 billion euros of budget in the MFF period of 2014-2020, which is almost a third of the whole EU budget (European Commission, n.d.-g).

It is also necessary to establish the role of the European Commission in cross-border cooperation and the EU in general. It is the EU institution that has a large set of functions. What is important is that the EC is responsible for shaping overall strategy and creation of policies for implementing it, so, it holds legislative power. Regional and urban development is one of the directions of EC's work, which aims to increase the EU's economic development, competitiveness, improve cohesion between European countries. The EC implements laws per EU treaties and the overall values of the union. Policy implementation, however, is also a part of EC's functions, which it performs together with member states and their local administrations. EC was supporting cross-border cooperation programs for a long time: the Interreg program started in 1990.

The first Euroregio, however, was established long before that, on the German-Dutch border in 1958. Since then, local actors all across Europe have been institutionalising their

cross-border relations. In the end, it led to the development of more than 200 entities, which now are partners of EC on the way to implement policy in the border regions.

Of course, EU policies have been influencing Member states and planning and development policies within them. Dühr et al. (2007) even state that national planning systems are under pressure to adapt and move in the direction of Europeanisation of planning. Reimer et al. (2014) as well conclude that EU governance agenda significantly influenced the transformation of planning in the member states. Financial incentives play a key role in this process of Europeanisation of planning. Regions, in their strive for Regional Development Funds or Cohesion Funds, adapt and change in order to comply with the EU policies (Reimer et al., 2014).

It is also necessary to mention the Schengen agreement since it is particularly relevant for the study. It was first signed in 1985, and in 1995 the border checks were removed between the first seven nations (Schengen Area, n.d.). This agreement is important for the topic of this thesis because it significantly reduces travel costs (not only monetary), which is crucial for cross-border commuting. Even though it is the EU that guarantees the freedom of movement of people as one of the four freedoms of the EU, it is the abolition of border control introduced by the Schengen agreement which has a huge impact on cross-border commuting.

Interreg (also known as European Territorial Cohesion) is one of the main instruments for cross-border collaboration development and one of two Cohesion policy goals. It provides a framework for collaborative actions between different tiers of governments and different member states. Interreg was created as a community initiative in 1990, and since 1994 went through four MFF periods to this day. The Interreg budget is 10,1 billion euros, which is divided among three types of programs. The general purpose of the program is to equalise regions of the EU, harmonizing development (economic, social, territorial) and making it more equal. The main aim of the Interreg programs is to support cooperation across borders on different levels, which is achieved with project funding (Interreg Europe, n.d.-b; European Commission, n.d.-h). As it was already mentioned, Interreg is further divided into three sub-programs.

Interreg A is the one operating on the lowest level. This program is responsible for the development of cross-border cooperation between NUTS III regions. The main goal is to solve common problems which emerge in the border regions of two (or more) countries thus releasing untapped growth potential and contributing to the harmonious development of the EU. It represents the most interest in this thesis. Each of 60 cooperation programs is managed

by a joint structure which is situated in one of the countries-participants and is responsible for the whole cooperation program. Programs finance projects which aim to enhance innovation, employment, and labour mobility, improve health care and education in more mature cooperations. It allows to improve quality of life and prevent “brains migration” to more developed centres. In some areas, however, projects target trust issues, risk prevention and emergency response activities are (European Commission, n.d.-i).

Interreg B is a program aimed at the development of transnational cooperation. It handles larger areas compared to Interreg A, involving bigger regions from different member states. The main goal is to improve cooperation and foster regional development in the EU by resolving common issues. To achieve that, the program funds projects related to the areas of innovation, environment, accessibility, urban development within 15 cooperation programs. Such programs are developed on the EU level, which allows to synchronise priorities and make a joint effort to address problems and adds European agenda in the process of planning. (European Commission, n.d.-j)

Interreg C is a program aimed at the development of Interregional cooperation. It works on an even higher level compared to Interreg B, including all member states in the development of practices and experience sharing, with the main aim of knowledge exchange. In particular, it should not be confused that Interreg EUROPE is one of Interreg C Interregional cooperation programs, alongside INTERACT, URBACT and ESPON, totalling four programs. (European Commission, n.d.-k)

Aside from the Interreg program, it is also crucial to mention one of the latest developments of EC: European Cross-Border Mechanism (ECBM). The idea behind it is to allow cross-border actors to apply laws and rules of the bordering country to lower the complexity of project implementation in border regions. However, as it is known today, ECBM did not end up in the final package of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy (Sielker, 2021).

## 2.4 Opportunities, obstacles, and solutions for cross-border cooperation

As Basboga (2020) states, border regions have specific challenges and opportunities, which often are the results of historic events. Thus, this chapter will focus on two main topics. The first section reviews the issues and obstacles which stand in a way of implementing and developing cross-border cooperations, while the second section discusses potential ways to address those issues.

### 2.4.1 Potential obstacles for cross-border cooperation

Despite all the potential benefits that cross-border cooperation can bring in the border regions, it can potentially fail if obstacles in place are not addressed. It is needed to look into academic reflections in order to understand which are possibly applicable to the selected case.

Despite the fact that, as Durand states, the EU provides unique conditions for cross-board cooperation, “*the brakes remain regarding the implementation of a joint strategy*” (2014, p. 118). Author’s study of empirical cases of agglomerations of Lillie and Luxemburg shows that planners encounter a considerable number of obstacles of different nature in the process of cross border spatial planning.

However, it is worth starting an overview with the mention of the work of Olszewski (2016), who researched the influence of 20 potential obstacles for cross-border cooperation between Poland and Czechia. This study stands out because it employs quantitative methods for analysis, which makes it particularly interesting since it allows to rank obstacles corresponding to their importance. The original table is presented in Appendix 1. There is a number of thematic groups of potential or existing issues which can be distinguished.

- The first one concerns ***funding***. According to the results of the research of Olszewski (2016), the most prominent and influential obstacle is the *lack of funding* available in order to perform cross-border activities. This problem is relevant for both NGOs and public actors, since they often (1) cannot afford them and (2) rarely have access to credits. On top of that, the *low efficiency of a financial settlement system of projects* further prevents them from getting loans. Durand (2014) also finds the *high complexity of funding and creation of financial plans, many parties, different taxation systems* as obstacles for cooperation.

- Two more issues identified by Olszewski (2016) are connected with **bureaucracy**, namely, *complex procedures to obtain funds* and *differences in regulations and legal norms* in different countries. Durand (2014) comes to the same conclusion: *variation in planning laws*, including *planning on different institutional levels*, hinder cooperation. For instance, in Belgium regions are completely in charge of the planning process, while in Germany Bundesländer have to use a central legislative framework, and only after that adopt its own planning laws. Moreover, the author also states that there is *no synchronisation of timescales* between European financing (MFF), local elections and implementation, all of which builds up even more complexity.

- Next, **cultural differences** step in. According to Olszewski (2016), the *language barrier* is indeed a significant factor preventing cross-border cooperation, even between countries with very similar languages. That is especially true when it comes to technical or legal terminology. Such findings are confirmed by the work of Svensson & Balogh (2018), who state that language is the single most important obstacle for cross-border cooperation. According to their study, it is often overlooked as European actors mostly focus on regulatory and legal issues. Durand (2014) as well states that cross-border projects are “*characterised by interdisciplinarity, multiple languages, cultural diversity and the challenge of communicating across sectoral boundaries*” (Barca, 2009, p. 98, as cited in Durand, 2014). That is only confirmed by Othengrafen, who states that traditions and social values have a profound impact on the spatial planning (Othengrafen 2010, in Reimer et al., 2014). Olszewski (2016) also finds that *negative stereotypes about neighbours, historic reasons*, as well as other *cultural barriers* as well contribute to preventing cross-border cooperation, albeit their influence is considerably less significant.

- The last relatively important factor preventing cross-border coordination is **differences in the organizational structure of institutions**, which does not belong to any groups mentioned above (Olszewski, 2016). This is yet again confirmed by Durand (2014). According to the author, *no coordination of institutional levels between the states, lack of detailed knowledge of neighbour’s frameworks* (political, administrative, cultural) leads to political and technical coordination problems. In the recent Cross-border Impact Assessment, Maastricht University overviews cooperation between the Netherlands and Germany. Limited citizen participation, which is a result of different planning culture, are also mentioned as obstacles to the

cooperation (Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross border cooperation and Mobility, 2020). These are, however, still seem to be applicable and possibly be even more relevant to the selected case of the Belgian-Dutch border.

There is also a number of potential obstacles which are present but do not influence cross-border cooperation as much as previously mentioned factors. According to Deppisch (2012), who researched the case of the Bavarian-Austrian border, *asymmetry in economic development* is also an issue, which can prevent cross-border cooperation despite all other pre-conditions. Olszewski (2016) as well finds this factor a potential disrupter, however, its significance is relatively low compared to the above-mentioned ones. Svensson & Balogh (2018) also state that very few people from the general public describe it as an issue preventing cooperation in border regions. Durand (2014) also states there might be competition, especially between economic rivalries, even if they belong to the same area of cooperation.

The *sufficient number of offers for cooperations* is not an issue for the selected case Czech-Polish cooperation Olszewski (2016). It stands true for the existence of *appropriate institutions* as well, even though Durand (2014) mentions that *identification of legitimate actors is difficult*.

Decoville & Durand (2017) call *trust* a critical issue since it is absolutely required to create a common vision of the development of cross-border regions. That also lines up with the work of Gomez (2016), who has a slightly different view on the topic. The author also briefly mentions the limited availability of legal and financial resources for actors in cross-border regions as obstacles to the development of cooperation. More importantly, he also notes that cooperation itself is very unstable in its nature, many cooperation projects exist because of friendship or personal relations, i.e., trust. It can easily come to an end when European funds run out, or simply because of a conflict. This idea seems to be reflected in Deppisch work as well, as the author states creating stable and lasting structures capable of the cooperation process, decision-making, and goals implementation as one of the challenges for cross-border regions (Deppisch, 2012). One of the reasons is that relationships between actors also have to be taken into consideration. Such cooperation will not work without mutual trust.

One more important obstacle highlighted by Dippisch is a need to develop a “*shared cross-border understanding of cooperation process and common aims of cross-border spatial development*” (Deppisch, 2012, p. 319). Maastricht University recently issued a Cross-border Impact Assessment, researchers conclude that in the Netherlands there is “*clear cross-border*

*ambitions but no clear vision on their implementation*” (Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross border cooperation and Mobility, 2020, p. 20). The author also states that common or similar issues are the key incentive that drives cooperation in border regions. According to her study, that is exactly what less successful regions are lacking. Because Interreg itself, even though being strong, is still not a sufficient incentive to create and sustain good performing cross-border regions.

#### 2.4.2 Possible ways to overcome cross-border challenges

After reviewing the literature on the topic, it can be stated that there are some similarities in the rhetoric of different scholars. As it was already mentioned in the overview of the EU cross-border collaborations chapter, many academics see the lack of control as an issue for the development of cross-border cooperations in the EU, namely, the need for a clear framework for cross-border collaboration and spatial planning.

So, one may conclude that a rigid legal framework is needed, alongside with clearly defined cross-border cooperation strategy and tight control from the EU in order to boost the effectiveness of cross-border collaborations in the EU. Especially if the work by van Straalen and Witte (2018), for example, is taken into account. It shows how lack of formal planning results in lower transparency and concludes that ultimately regional governance depends on power relations. Moreover, Evers and de Vries (2013) also argue that the role of central government is still important to deal with collective action problems at the mega-city (regional) level. Thus, one may assume, that since cross-border governance is a specific case of regional governance, some kind of centralised control is also needed for cross-border collaborations in the EU.

It is of crucial importance, however, to note that studies mentioned in the previous paragraph analyse governance within national borders. Even if the same conclusions apply to supranational cross-border governance, it does not necessarily mean that the idea of power relations can work out in a remotely similar manner.

Practically speaking, there is no legal body under the EU control to ensure coordination between different actors across administrative and international borders, to connect the needs of municipalities, balance the interests of states, and fine-tune the executed projects or even the policy itself. One may propose that it is a good idea therefore to work towards such direction. The idea that some kind of supranational institution can enhance cross-border cooperation seems to be logical and appealing since that is the way how regional governance normally

works. The academic reflections mentioned in the previous chapters further support this: advocating for concrete strategy and a rigid framework for cross-border cooperations.

However, it is hard to imagine the existence of such top-down coordination in the first place. There are several reasons for that. First of all, arguably, the EU likely has neither the bureaucratic nor the financial means for that. Furthermore, that it also undermines fundamental principles of Cohesion policy: “action is adapted to local and regional needs and priorities” (European Commission, n.d.-1), or general EU subsidiarity principle. These pillar principles do not match well with the idea of concrete strategy for cross-border development since the latter implies creators of it are aware of all local needs and can steer from the supranational level. Such an idea seems to be even less realistic in combination with the concept of territoriality which was mentioned in the previous paragraph. Moreover, there is some evidence that it is not necessarily needed. For instance, in her article, Deppisch conducts a study of six regions at the German-Austrian border, arguing that even less mature cooperation “*are capable of governing their own affairs if certain factors are clearly manifested*” (Deppisch, 2012, p.316).

As was already mentioned, soft spaces can have potential issues, such as informality and lack of transparency. However, informality in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. ‘Informal planning’ is also known as ‘soft planning’; a term used for planning that is not based on legal or financial instruments and only concerns informal forms of action and implementing shared visions (Waterhout 2010, as cited in Kaczmarek 2018). In the literature overview, Kaczmarek (2018) observes scholars arguing for the need for informal planning, especially in the soft spaces and cross border regions, and agrees with it. In the end, he argues that “*new flexible instruments [of informal planning] can never replace classic plans*” (Kaczmarek, 2018, p. 185). He adds, however, that they can be complementary to them. Van Straalen and Witte also conclude that formal and informal planning can be complementary, but it is needed to link “*(inter)national policy-making and local policy implementation at the metropolitan planning level*” (van Straalen & Witte, 2018, p. 162). Other researchers come to the same conclusion: formal procedures can be supplemented with informal ones, as it will improve flexibility and de-escalate conflict (Reimer et al., 2014, p. 10).

The lack of the ridged control, however, seems to have one more explanation. According to the work of Reimer et al., the EU uses a carrot rather than a stick:

*Quite apart from any legally binding effects, their [European development policy] aim is to develop paradigmatic influence and to shape the “shared mental models” of the actors involved. In the interests of European agenda setting, they expedite learning processes that initially aim to change the cognitive logics of the actors and can, but must*

*not necessarily, lead to a gradual adaptation of formal structures.* (Reimer et al., 2014, p. 6)

In addition, financial incentives, especially the Interreg program, are used to promote the European agenda in spatial planning. Authors specifically highlight that European planning is not a firm structure but rather is a set of locally approved and adaptive actions.

Dippisch (2012) also names key factors which contribute to the success of cross-border governance. First of all, the existence of a common issue that is relevant for both regions is crucial since Interreg cannot motivate such activity on its own. Next, personal relationships are very important as well. They can help to build trust and become a foundation of even stronger relationships for the cross-border region. Finally, independent, neutral, and common management is needed to successfully run cross-border cooperation, because only with such conditions it will be able to effectively resolve emerging conflicts.

## 2.5 Analytical framework

This section presents the theoretical framework used in this research. However, it is first necessary to briefly summarize as several conclusions from the theoretical chapter and literature review can be drawn.

First, in general, cross-border cooperation programs can be called economically beneficial for border regions. Moreover, there is rather strong evidence that cross-border labour mobility also improves economic development in the border region.

Second, there are many obstacles that can stand in the way of cross-border cooperation, and not all of them are created equal. The language barrier can be overcome, as well as complexities with funding and synchronisation of timelines. However, it is way harder to deal with differences in planning systems in different countries as well as with the territoriality of the member states.

Third, at this point, it is impossible to implement a top-down EU-led strategy on the development of cross-border cooperation due to the nature of the union. Despite the inapplicability of such an approach to cross-border governance, it can be quite beneficial to harmonize spatial planning documents in the border regions, or even institutionalise them. It will allow to use benefits of the soft spaces and avoid potential problems.

Cross-border collaborations is a complicated and long-term process. In order to study them, the approach to theoretical framework used in this thesis was developed based on a literature review in the previous chapter. Essentially, the conclusion is that any cross-border cooperation can be analysed through the following lens: opportunities, obstacles, and solutions. Each lens consists of multiple elements, or perspectives, which are presented in the Figure 1 below.

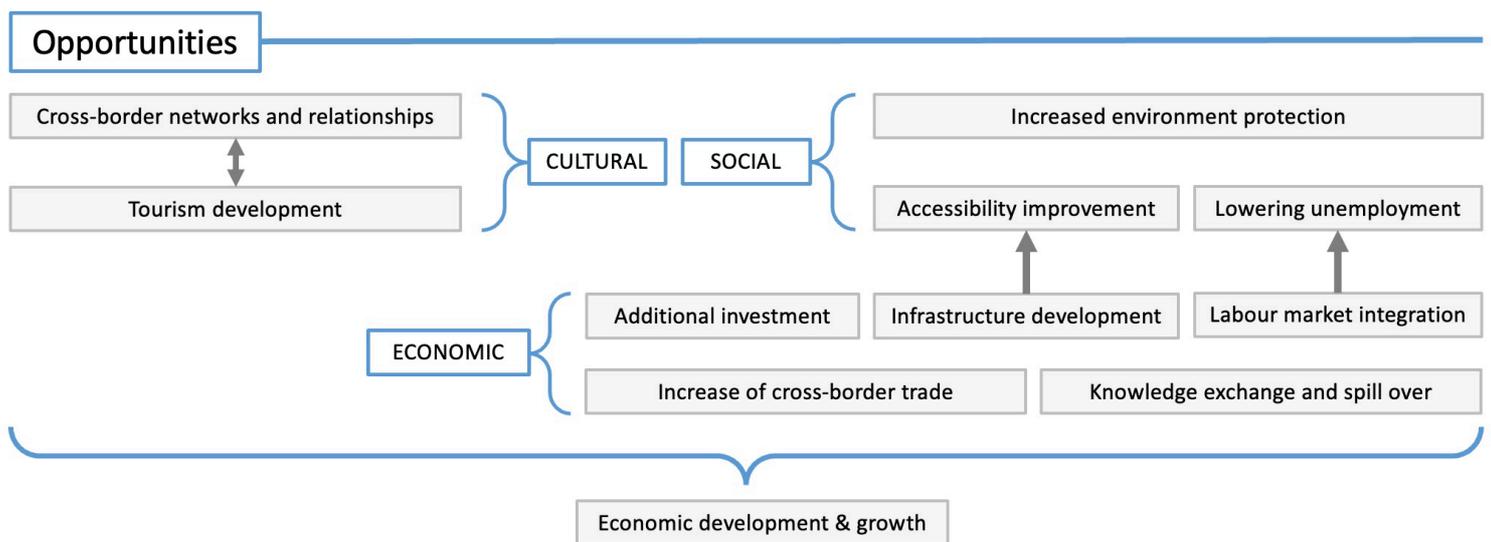
Opportunities are further classified as both socio-economic cultural-economic, and purely economic; obstacles are categorised as related to funding and monetary issues, legal and regulatory, cultural, and others, which do not fit into any of the previously mentioned categories. Finally, solutions are divided into instruments of cooperation encouragement, incentives for cooperation, and tools to foster it. The elements of the table were derived based on the information obtained in the literature review and grouped thematically after that.

The analysis will be conducted using policy document analysis and stakeholder interviews. It will be identified which of the following opportunities and obstacles are mentioned (i.e., known), and which solutions are incorporated into policy documents.

Additionally, each of the elements can be assigned to certain keywords, which are searched for during policy document analysis. The keywords are further elaborated on in the methodology chapter. At the same time, the theoretical framework allows to form a basis for the interviews. Interview topics are formed in line with the topics listed in the table, as well as with the research questions of the thesis. The methodology chapter will provide a more detailed explanation of the methodologies used in the analysis

It is expected that at least some elements of the analytical framework are interrelated and can cause cumulative effects. For instance, differences in regulation and legal norms can be further complicated by different languages parties are using, while infrastructure development can help both with tourism development and accessibility improvement. It is crucial to highlight that all the elements should be considered when discussing existing issues or proposed solutions to them.

Figure 1. Integrated framework on projects collaborations



## Barriers & obstacles

### Finance related

Lack of funding

High complexity of managing finances and creation of financial plans

Complex procedures to obtain funds

### Legal and regulatory

Differences in regulation and legal norms (planning laws themselves and levels of government involved)

Different taxation systems

No or lack of coordination of institutional levels between the states, including synchronisation of timescales



Lack of knowledge of neighbours' frameworks

### Cultural

Territoriality of the states

Language barrier

Historic reasons, negative stereotypes

Cultural differences

Lack of trust

### Other

No clear vision of cooperation

Many parties

## Solutions

### Encouragement

Show the evidence of Cohesion Policy effectiveness

Informal planning (easier to do) + soft spaces

Independent, neutral, and common management (feeling of control and effective conflict resolution)

### Incentive

Finding common issues to foster collaboration

INTERREG funds as financial incentives to cooperate

### Tools

Usage of interpersonal relations

Institutionalisation of cross-border cooperation

Using European integration process to even out administrative, political, fiscal, and legislative differences

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Chosen method and research design

According to Bryman (2012), there are several types of research design: experimental, cross-sectional (survey), longitudinal, case study, and comparative. For this thesis a case study method was chosen, as it allows to conduct an in-depth analysis of the single case. In particular, the mobility of labour between two countries: Belgium and the Netherlands. The case study method is applicable for the topic of the thesis because it allows to have deep dive into the special features and characteristics of one selected geographical area, generating a detailed explanation of the phenomena as a result. The nature of this research dictates the use of qualitative methods. Using an inductive approach to reasoning generates general conclusions based on the study of this specific case. This thesis leans towards an interpretivist epistemological position, trying to understand society by studying it, with constructionist ontological position: perceiving social properties as outcomes of interactions between individuals (Bryman, 2012).

The type of research design defines the used methods. This thesis starts with a study of theory and other related literature on the topic, after which the two main research methods are used: document analysis and interviews. Such a combination of methods was chosen because it offers several advantages, and it is expected that the two methods will complement each other. This approach is used to increase the validity of the research and is known as triangulation: using more than one source for data collection or method for the analysis of the data (Bryman, 2012).

The document analysis allows efficient and effective data collection, being a reliable and “non-reactive” source of data, which can also serve as a guide for the development of interview questions. Being secondary data, they imply some limitations. Bryman (2012) highlights the four key limitations of secondary data: lack of familiarity with the data, the complexity of the data, no control over data quality, absence of key variables. The main disadvantages of document analysis specifically, however, include possible incompleteness or inaccuracy, bias, retrievability challenges. Document analyses provide a deeper understanding of the issue and provide general context and information on the topic. Section 3.3. *Data selection* provides the exact list of documents used in this thesis. After gaining secondary information from document analysis, interviews play a central role in the research.

Stakeholder interviews allow efficient, well-articulated access to knowledge. They are the source of primary information, the kind which is quite often not stated in the artefacts, e.g., members' views and insights on the topic. Interviews are important because they can also provide more context to the documents and topic in general, as well as expertise and non-printed know-hows. However, they also bear some possible challenges, such as the bias of interviewees (promoting point of view, desire to look good or to turn attention away from something), susceptance to the presence of an interviewer, communication errors and misunderstanding (especially in foreign language), false data provided either by mistake or on purpose. Section 3.3 *Data selection* will present the information about the selection of the interviewees, interview topics and more details. After conducting interviews, document analysis once again allows for using triangulation to prove and enrich the data gathered from the interviews.

### 3.2 Case selection

This Belgian-Dutch border is chosen for analysis for several reasons. It represents a rather unique case because it seems to fulfil many of the preconditions for cross-border cooperation and does not reach high levels of cross-border labour mobility at the same time.

First, this case is one of the longest, most mature cross-border cooperations with vast experience. The history of just Interreg programs dates at least to 2000, and Interreg as a community initiative exists since 1990. The Benelux Union, which both Belgium and the Netherlands are a part of, was created significantly earlier: in the middle the XX century. It is reasonable to expect that such long cross-border interaction should facilitate reasonable grounds for the development of cross-border cooperation.

Second, economic pre-conditions in the region favour development of cross-border relations. Specifically, both countries are similar in terms of economic performance. For instance, in 2019 the GDP per capita was 44 500 and 48 800 euros for Belgium and the Netherlands respectively. Both countries have declining unemployment rates since 2013 (though it is worth noting that Belgium has higher unemployment rates in general) (IMF 2020).

Next, countries have closely related cultures and demographics, but more importantly, in the Flanders region, Dutch is the main language as well, which means that the language barrier practically doesn't exist. As was already mentioned earlier, according to (Svensson & Balogh, 2018), communication difficulties due to uncommon language is the main barrier for cross-border mobility. So, this factor is expected to be an important cooperation facilitator.

However, as was mentioned in the Introduction chapter, the level of commuting between border regions of the two nations remains rather low over a period of 20 years. Thus, given these favourable conditions, it is worth investigating why there are still obstacles in place and what those obstacles are, as well as how cooperation is promoted and facilitated, and what prevents it from further development. It is quite possible that reasons hindering cross-border developments and cross-border commuting are not the same.

Even though the case in this research is considered a rare case of favourable conditions, it does not necessarily mean that the results cannot be generalised and are not applicable to other cross-border cooperations. For instance, the applicability is most likely to be relevant first and foremost within the EU itself, as it provides a large part of the unique setting (e.g., open borders and free movement of labour). However, it is to keep in mind that other conditions may vary. The German language is common in the region of the Bavarian-Austrian border; however, economic differences there are more pronounced (Deppisch, 2012). In Eastern Europe the spoken languages are similar and often do not follow national borders, with alike economic factors also present; however, those cross-border cooperations are significantly younger than ones in the Western part of the EU, often with even more pronounced historical mistrust.

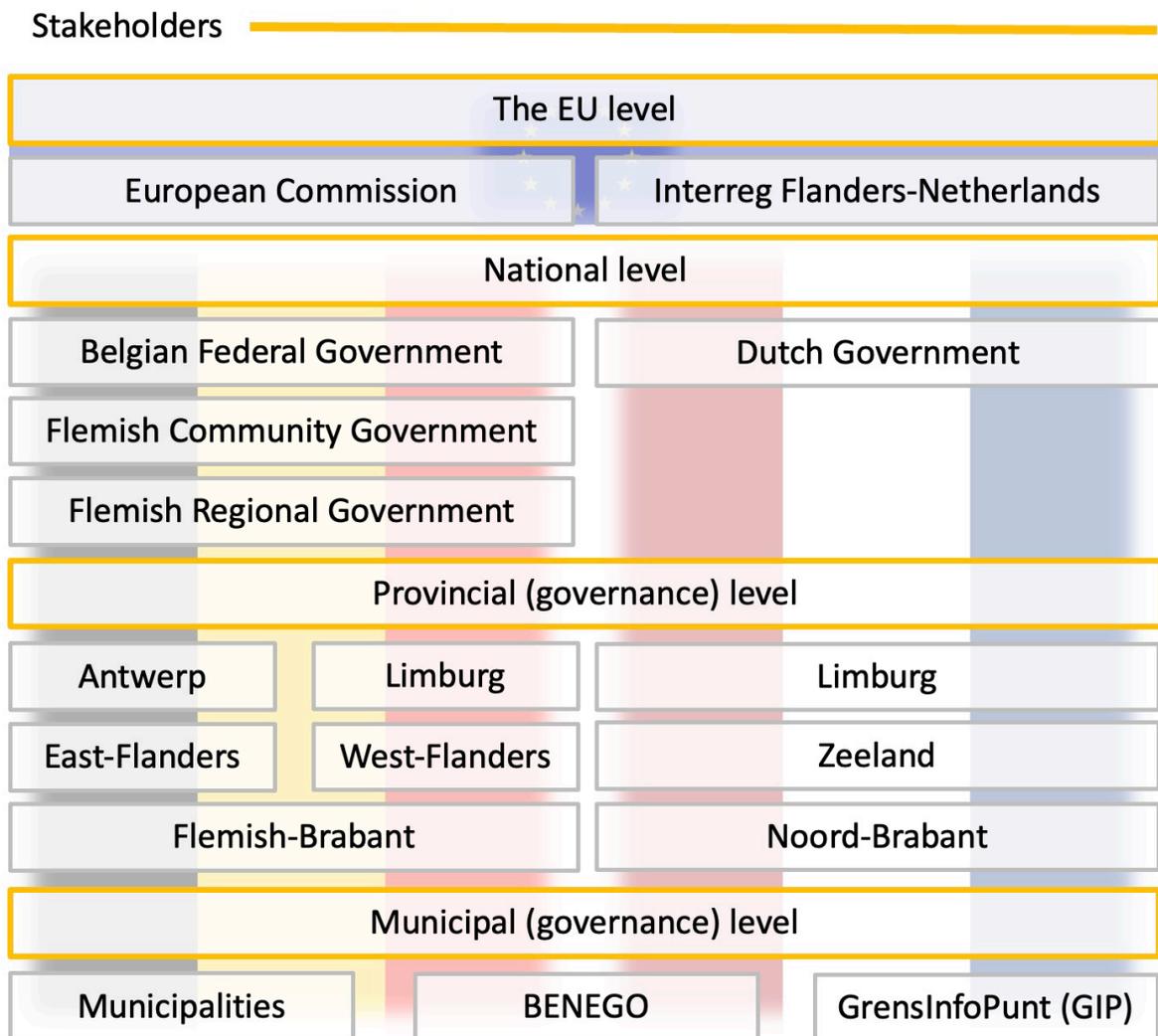
So, it is crucial to keep in mind the initial preconditions of the selected region mentioned before. It doesn't mean that conclusions in general are not applicable for other cases of cross-border cooperation (both inside and outside of the EU), they rather should be interpreted carefully.

### 3.3 Data selection

The key idea for the data selection is to reflect different scales of governance. Figure X represents all stakeholders which were identified for the selected case of the Belgian-Dutch border region.

Figure 2 represents all stakeholders which were identified for the selected case of the Belgian-Dutch border region.

Figure 2. Identified stakeholders in the selected case.



For the document analysis it is necessary to study documents related to both to higher EU level as well as lower municipal government level, more practice-oriented artifacts. The detailed information regarding all the analysed documents, including title, publication date, authors, and commentary, is presented in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. List of the documents used for analysis

Title	Year of publication	Authors	Selection	Comment
Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands, 2021	2021	Interreg Flanders-Netherlands program	This document was selected because it represents the view of the corresponding EU Interreg program on the Belgian-Dutch cross-border region.	Document is still work in progress, some chapters are not finished. Provided by one of the members of the Joint Comete of the Flanders-Netherlands program.
Cross-border cooperation in the EU. Report	July, 2020	European Commission	This report is included into analysis because it reprints what is communicated to the EC regarding the topic.	This is a report of the survey conducted by the European Commission regarding the opinion of general public living in cross-border regions about current state of cross-border interaction.
Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027 (draft version)	13.11.2020	Interreg Euregio Meuse-Rhine program	Even though EMR region also includes cross-border cooperation with Germany, which is beyond the scope of this paper, this program is still one of interest for this thesis. EMR region overlaps with the area of the selected Belgian-Dutch case, and can present important information. That is why this document as well was selected for the analysis.	This is a draft version of the summary of the EMR region, some parts are not finished and potentially are a subject to change. For analysis the most recent version of the draft available on the program website was used.
Breaking down borders, connecting regions, moving people	30.01.2017	Action Team Cross-border Economy and Labour	This is a report of the action team, which was performing “field work” related to cross-border cooperation in the Netherlands, to the higher tiers of Dutch government.	The document was provided by one of the respondents. The document presents both issues for cross-border collaborations as well as developed solutions. It is unknown what happened to the results the action team came up with.

The importance of different country cultures in NL-BE case	07.03.2019	BENEGO representative, 2021	This interview was analysed as well because it uncovers the role of cultural differences between Belgium and the Netherlands. It was selected for the analysis because negligible differences in culture were expected to be one of the preconditions which can facilitate cross-border cooperation.	Interview with Professor Geert Hofstede, discussing the cultural differences which stand in the way of cooperation between Belgium and the Netherlands.
35th anniversary BENEGO	October, 2020	Herman Suykerbuyk, BENEGO	The transcript of the speech was also included in the analysis as it describes in detail the history of collaboration on municipal level in the border region, as well as its current state and aims.	BENEGO is an organization set up by Belgian municipalities (13) in the Antwerp region and Dutch municipalities (12) to the South of Breda. It dates back to 1967, becoming legal entity in 1993. The aim is to improve cooperation by providing consultations and seizing opportunities for common interests.
How the North Kempen and North Brabant work together	May, 2020	Peter Thoelen	This article was selected because it describes how collaboration happens on the municipal level, as well as what such organization is concerned about.	This is an article based on the interview in NederBelgischMagazine with representatives of BENEGO.
Cross-border labor market: beyond Romanticism, 2015	2015	Dr. Arjen J.E. Edzes, Dr. Viktor Venhorst, Prof. dr. Jouke van Dijk	This article was provided after the interview by the expert, containing critical remarks regarding the idea of cross-border labour policies. It was not originally included in the literature review since it is only available in Dutch.	The article discusses the lack of empirical evidence of the effectiveness of policies aimed at improving cross-border labour mobility, thus questions too much ambition about this field.

Interview topics are based on the literature review, interviews themselves are semi-structured in order to maintain focus on the desired topic and, in the meantime, provide flexibility for the interviewee (Bryman, 2012).

The interviews have been conducted with the following respondents, which are presented in the Table 2 below:

Table 2. List of the interviewees

<b>Position</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Type</b>
Professor of Economic Geography	University of Groningen	30.06.2021	30 min	Expert
Advisor at GIP	Bergen-op-Zoom, Woensdrecht, GrensInfoPunt (GIP)	04.08.2021	34 min	Stakeholder
Consultant City Projects	Antwerp City Council	05.08.2021	-	Written response
Senior advisor international affairs	Noord-Brabant province	09.08.2021	37 min	Stakeholder
Strategic policy advisor, Economic Development	Sittard-Geleen	13.08.2021	28 min	Stakeholder
Space and mobility coordinator	Turnhout city region	20.08.2021	27 min	Stakeholder
Policy officer	Flemish government, Transport region Antwerpen	23.08.2021	26 min	Stakeholder
Management consultant	BENEGO	1.09.2021	27 min	Stakeholder

The same key idea of the document analysis is adopted while conducting the interviews: interviewees represent different scales of governance. Additionally, representatives from both countries have been interviewed. Such an approach increases the validity of the research since both sides can communicate their view on the issue.

The very first interview was conducted with a professor of economic geography at the University of Groningen, whose interests include cross-border labour mobility. The interview with him was conducted earlier than the others, as it served an exploratory purpose to receive insight and academic opinion on the topic.

Next, there are two interviewees from higher levels of government: representative from the province of Noord-Brabant and representative from the Flemish government. These respondents are very important for the research, as the views of provincial and municipal government on the same issue can differ significantly, they also have different goals and means to achieve them. This, conducting interviews with representatives from the provincial government level is important for the validity of the research in this thesis.

The rest of the respondents were selected based on their geographical location.

One respondent is an advisor at organization GrensInfoPunt, which aims to improve provision of information regarding cross-border activities and opportunities among the general public living in the Brabantse Wal. He is also affiliated with municipalities of Bergen-op-Zoom and Woensdrecht.

Next interviewee is a policy advisor affiliated with the municipality of Sittard-Geleen in Dutch Limburg province. This organization was contacted as it represents one of comparatively large settlements in the area. At the same time, it is located in Dutch Limburg, and has different set of obstacles and opportunities compared to those in Noord-Brabant.

It was not possible to organise an interview with the consultant who is affiliated with Antwerp city council, which is a major city in the border area. It is important for the research as it is a point of interest for potential cross-border workers (due to its market size) but also it is a stop on the high-speed railroad line between the two countries. Nevertheless, the contacted person provided a written response with opinion on the topic and shared information regarding the practical difficulties people face when doing cross-border commuting.

One more interviewee represents Turnhout city region, which is closely located to the Border. Essentially, it is a small “metropolitan area”, which should help to coordinate development in the area by consolidating decision-making. Even though it is located in the province of Antwerp as well, the region is significantly closer to the border and has smaller community. Thus, it is expected that it represents a different kind of situation compared to the city of Antwerp.

The last respondent is a manager at BENEGO, collaboration of 25 Dutch and Belgian municipalities in the provinces of Noord-Brabant and Antwerp. This organization is specifically important for this research as it was impossible to get in contact with some smaller municipalities while BENEGO representative can communicate issues they are facing and their view on the situation in general. Practically, it can offer a generalised view on the topic from several municipalities. This organization has a long history of cooperation and can offer an interesting perspective on the topic.

Each potential interviewee has been reached via work email, containing description of the thesis and a request for the interview. The interviews lasted approximately half an hour. Due to the global pandemic, all the interviews were conducted online.

It is worth noting, however that not all identified stakeholders have been interviewed. Higher tiers of government are typically harder to reach, thus, the main targets were municipal level governments. Getting in contact with the Joint Secretariat of the Belgian-Dutch region did not result in the interview, however, yielded an important internal document. In general,

many municipalities and other entities have been contacted, such as Maastricht, Breda, Eindhoven, Hasselt, and several others, unfortunately, with no response or decline.

Current selection, however, is still viable for answering research questions of this thesis. The selection includes representatives from different countries, different levels of government, and areas not only of different geography but also of different characteristics, like population size and economy.

### 3.4 Operationalization

In order to conduct document analysis, the following keywords associated with the opportunities, obstacles, and solutions have been derived from the theoretical framework and presented in the Table 3. It is expected that the keywords searched in the document or interview transcript will prevent accidental exclusion of the parts with topics in question. The table presents keywords corresponding to each topic.

Table 3. Keywords used for the search of key topics.

<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Barriers &amp; obstacles</b>	<b>Solutions</b>
Economic and social	Funding and monetary	Encouragement
employment, labour market, infrastructure, communication, job, personal relations,	funding, money, investment, financial (plan), fund(s)	interreg, fund, Cohesion Policy, informal, management, conflict, independent, neutral
Economic	Legal and regulatory	Reasoning
economic, development, growth, tourism, investment, knowledge exchange/sharing, spill over (effects), trade	regulation(s), norm(s), legal, law, government, state, tax, institution, timescale	incentive, common issue, problem, obstacle, agenda
Social	Cultural	Tools
protection, sustainability, accessibility, mobility, commuting, communications,	language, linguistic, culture, stereotype, historic, difference, territoriality	instiutualisation, interpersonal, personal, relations, European, soft spaces, soft planning,
	Other	
	framework, trust, vision, cooperation	

The analyses of the documents were conducted in the following way: first, the initial inspection of the artefact is performed. It provides an understanding of the relevance of the source, whether it is potentially beneficial to include it into the analysis, as well as to develop an initial understanding of the document.

Second, the main topics discussed and ideas communicated in the document are highlighted, structured, and finally coded following the analytical framework. This step also aims to include the ideas which are not present in the crafted analytical framework but turn out to be important for the research in general.

Next, the keywords from the Table X are used to search for potentially missing pieces of information, which are added to corresponding topics. After that, it is possible to build a comprehensive picture of the artefact's contents.

The topic list for the interviews has been inspired by and constructed following the analytical framework. The interview begins with:

- short self-introduction of the interviewee, naming their position, organization, and affiliation with the topic of cross-border cooperation and commuting.

To avoid potential bias and to keep the interview within the timeframe, suggestive or normative questions regarding concrete points from the analytical framework are replaced with more general questions about three groups of topics. It also allows respondents to communicate their vision, what they think is the most important. In the first part of the interview respondents are asked to name what they see as:

- opportunities, obstacles, and potential solutions for cross-border collaborations in general
- policies and initiatives that help to promote cross-border collaborations.

After that the focus is shifted towards the topic of cross-border labour mobility specifically; topics include questions about:

- obstacles for commuting and labour mobility
- ways to improve the current situation
- the perceived role and importance of the topic in the current agenda
- known successful cross-border projects related to the topic

Aside from that, questions regarding the following topics are also discussed as they can yield important practical information:

- personal cross-border experience
- global pandemic effects on cross-border work

It is needed to note that interviews can potentially derive from the forementioned points. Topic list is needed to provide a guidance for discussion and extract as much information as

potentially possible, however, interview may not follow it but still provide viable and useful information.

The interviews have been recorded and notes have been taken during the interview, reflecting the main ideas and the most attention-worthy topics which occurred during the discussion. Such notes served as grounds to create a foundation for axial coding. Afterwards the recordings were transcribed, and the interviews have been analysed and coded in accordance with the derived categories.

## 4. Case context

In this chapter background information will be provided to better explain the context of the selected case. There are several points to keep in mind, however, it is worth starting with a brief description of planning systems in the selected countries. It is followed by an explanation of the benefits for cross-border cooperation from commuting specifically. The final section is devoted to the description of the current state of cross-border commuting between Belgium and the Netherlands.

### 4.1 Planning systems in Belgium and the Netherlands

To acquire information about planning systems in Belgium and the Netherlands the book *Spatial planning systems and practices in Europe* (Reimer et al., 2014) was employed as a main source of information. It was chosen as it provides a systematic and very detailed overview of many European planning systems, including ones of the interest of this thesis, another advantage being the fact that it is relatively recent. Chapters have been written by several authors, while the whole publication was edited by different members of academia, thus lowering the possibility of bias introduction and inaccuracies.

The first two sections of this chapter will briefly describe the state of the planning systems in Belgium and the Netherlands. It is followed by the section that discusses how corresponding governance systems can potentially deal with such phenomena as cross-border commuting.

#### *Netherlands*

It is crucial to mention that the Netherlands and Belgium have very different political systems, and thus planning systems as well. Such differences may become a great obstacle, affecting everything from financing to decision-making. This section examines the planning systems of both countries in greater detail.

Roughly a decade ago, the Dutch system of spatial planning underwent a substantial change. In terms of governance, the central government became less concerned with the integrated spatial vision of the country and passed as many planning responsibilities as possible onto municipalities and provinces, also aiming at simplification and integration in spatial planning.

Next, economic development became the main priority replacing the integrated approach to spatial development, which resulted in the shifting of geographical focus towards the few

most competitive regions of the country (Zonneveld & Evers, in Reimer et al., 2014, p. 61). Another result of that is more involvement of both private and public stakeholders, as well as attracting foreign investors to participate in infrastructure projects (Reimer et al., 2014, p. 287).

In the Netherlands planning is hierarchical and is coordinated between different sectors. It still remains consensus- and negotiation-driven.

That means that the Dutch planning system is no longer unified and thus can incorporate different approaches on each level. Moreover, it shows convergence and divergence with EU goals at the same time: favouring economic development goals but not distributing it fairly across the state.

As municipalities became fully responsible for spatial development, that led to a situation where *“Unless the right incentives are in place at the local level, spatial policies can easily and embarrassingly fail”* (Zonneveld & Evers, in Reimer et al., 2014, p. 68). The question is whether such a statement applies to cross-border cooperation projects as well, and if so, whether the incentives in place are sufficient.

### *Belgium*

As for Belgium, since the 1980s the planning systems in Belgian regions are completely autonomous, in this thesis the main interest is the one of Flanders. In general, there have been numerous changes in the planning system during the last 60 years, and to this day Flemish government doesn't have a clear view of spatial planning in the future. (Van den Broeck, Moulaert, Kuhk, Lievois and Schreurs, in Reimer et al., 2014, p. 169)

Interestingly, around the same time as in the Netherlands, in 2009, a new Flemish planning codex entered force, which shifted the agenda towards neo-liberalism once again. The government changed the planning system “in order to increase local economic development possibilities” (Reimer et al., 2014, p. 172), it became a flexible liberal permit system, with limited structure planning and “short-tracking of strategic projects”.

Belgium has a three-level subsidiary planning system. It is shifting towards strategic planning on each of them, thus, delivering three-level structure plans, alongside the development of land-use permit system and project planning.

Belgium seems to fluctuate between land-use planning, permit systems, project planning and strategic planning. There are several most important aspects which need to be considered when talking about Flemish planning.

First, since the beginning of the XXI century, there was a fragmentation of planning instruments which resulted in a planning system with a set of them for every domain of

planning. Rural development, transportation, housing, etc. have no connection, there is no coherence between them; moreover, societal support is lost, and focus is shifted towards project implementation. All provinces and 80% of municipalities have created their own structure plans, with highly variable quality and impact.

Second, property rights have always been (with minor fluctuations) and remain extremely important and embedded in institutions, often restricting planning instruments: *“Today, Flemish structure planning and land-use planning have been reoriented towards the protection of private property, which hampers the capacity of government to implement a coherent spatial policy and collective spatial projects.”* (Van den Broeck, Moulaert, Kuhk, Lievois and Schreurs, in Reimer et al., 2014, p. 185). Demands for space are satisfied, there is practically no consideration of social values and effects (for instance, segregation and equity), hollowing out of such concepts as development quality or sustainability.

### *Summary*

In general, it can be stated that Belgium and the Netherlands have very different planning traditions. According to (Reimer et al., 2014, p. 278), Dutch planning belongs to the comprehensive (or integrated) type, while Belgian represents land-use planning.

The trend toward simplification of planning process is connected, or at least correlated, with EU policies like Interreg, as they require more “flexible planning” in “soft spaces” with “fuzzy boundaries” (Reimer et al., 2014, p. 280). Such programs were the main advocates for the new governance and practices in planning. However, despite the fact that the EU agenda influenced the spatial planning of member states a lot, *“it has not led to a “harmonization” of spatial planning systems and practices in Europe”* (Reimer et al., 2014, p. 298).

### *Capacity to handle cross-border matters*

The capacity of handling cross-border commuting also seems to differ between the states, albeit the situation on the both sides of the border is similar. If the topic of cross-border cooperation can gain interest of the higher levels of government, cross-border commuting and labour mobility does not receive that much attention. It is evident both from the document analysis as well as interviews. As it was mentioned before, 10% of the Interreg funds are allocated to it. The interviews also confirm that the interest of higher governmental bodies in the topic, even on the provincial level, is rather low.

Dutch border municipalities, however, are also interested in cross-border matters and see them as a source of opportunities. That might serve as an explanation why there are “a cross-border ambitions”, but no “comprehensive vision”. For instance, according to one of the

interviewees, municipalities in Dutch Limburg would prefer workers to maintain the current place of residence and to work in German cities, like Düsseldorf, Duisburg, or Köln, which are in the adequate commuting range, rather than to completely move to the Randstad, which is located almost twice further away.

As was already mentioned, Dutch municipalities have more freedom to incorporate spatial decisions and come up with their own development plans. However, they cannot handle the issues related to cross-border labour mobility only by themselves: it requires a more consistent and organized approach.

In Belgium situation appears to be similar. According to multiple interviewees, the Flemish government aims first and foremost to improve the situation within the region, developing cities of the “metropolitan region”. The governmental structure, however, is even more rigid and hierarchical, and municipalities have less freedom. Not much can be done without the intervention of the higher tiers of government as the issue of cross-border labour mobility is quite complex and requires more resources than border municipalities have.

It seems that even though working on improving cross-border labour mobility is beneficial for the border regions, and the local government is well aware of the existing issues and what needs to be done to overcome them, higher tiers of government do not see such issues as worthy of attention. The potential benefits do not justify the use of scarce resources.

## 4.2 Benefits of cross-border cooperation and commuting

Before discussing concrete advantages of cross-border integration in general and commuting in particular, it is worth mentioning that the existence of borders hinders trade, and thus the economic development. In general, the research community largely arrived at a consensus that borders still matter, even in cases of developed countries with “lifted” borders, like the EU (Basboga, 2020). As was already mentioned, in 2001 increasing levels of cross-border labour mobility were already perceived by the EU as a viable option for economic development (van Houtum & van Der Velde, 2003). This idea is partially confirmed by the evaluation of Interreg effectiveness conducted in 2018, which suggests that generally the program can be called successful and effective (Interreg Europe, 2020). Ex-post evaluation for the period of 2000-2006 was conducted as well, with similar mostly positive results (European Commission, 2010). However, as Basboga notices, such “*reports can be considered more as big-picture evaluations rather than pure empirical research*” (Basboga, 2020, p. 537).

One of the main benefits brought by cross-border cooperation is that it addresses common issues which are still specific to border areas. Olszewski (2016) names the following: lack of infrastructure, general underdevelopment caused by peripheral position, lack of environmental protection, the existence of cultural barriers. According to the author, Polish-Czech cross-border collaboration allowed the region to gain the following benefits through the implementation of cross-border projects: improvement in communications and accessibility, economic and tourism development, as well as the development of cross-border interpersonal relations due to the ‘soft’ nature of such projects. When the internal border was lifted, it resulted in additional economic growth in the border area (Olszewski, 2016).

Camagni, Capello, & Caragliu (2019) conclude that legal and administrative obstacles still hinder economic development in the EU border regions. Authors estimate that if those obstacles are to be overcome, it would allow border regions to be 8.7% richer than they are now. Darvas, Mazza, & Midões (2019) found out that cross-border cooperation projects bring more growth compared to the ones which do not involve cross-border collaborations. Authors also state that such cooperation leads to knowledge sharing and spillover effects, which, in the end, provides benefits way beyond Interreg projects. Moreover, cross-border integration allows regions to experience the benefits of agglomeration and economies of scale (Broersma et al., 2020).

So, in general, it can be stated that cross-border cooperation programs have a positive effect on the border regions. As for cross-border commuting, the research on that topic is rather

scarce. According to the EU law, cross-border commuters are people who work in one EU country while living in another one, commuting at least once a week between those places (Your Europe, 2021), and there is no or very little research regarding the economic effects of visa-free travel in the EU (Basboga, 2020). There seem to be several benefits associated with cross-border commuting. OECD (2013) states that higher levels of cross-border labour mobility help to stimulate development and economic growth. That explains why cross-border commuting draws of the EC, being in search of a way to enhance economic growth and cohesion in border regions (which, as was already mentioned, are typically less developed) (European Commission, 2017).

The research on cross-border labour mobility in the EU by Basboga (2020) yields very important findings for this thesis. The author conducts an empirical study of the economic effects of European integration, specifically the free movement of people, on the border regions. The research shows that the opening of borders resulted in a 2.7% increase in regional GVA (gross value added) per capita, or to be more precise, a 100% increase in the number of cross-border project partners leads to a roughly 2.3% increase of GVA per capita. Thus, it can be stated that cross-border mobility indeed contributes to the improvement of economic development in the border regions.

Although the concrete reasons for such positive effects are to be unveiled, Basboga (2020) names the most likely reasons: integration of cross-border labour markets, increase in cross-border trade and investments, and knowledge exchange. The author also argues that personal engagements help cross-border cooperations contribute to the establishment of long-term partnerships which span beyond cross-border projects, as well as that cross-border projects can ease the access to the other side of the border for small businesses. In general, Basboga proves that cross-border cooperation is crucially important for facilitating economic development in the border regions of Europe as it lowers entry costs and helps to kick-start cross-border cooperation. (Basboga, 2020)

### 4.3 Zooming in on the commuting in the Belgian-Dutch border region

As was mentioned before in the theoretical chapter, the levels of cross-border commuting are low. Despite being almost 20 years old, the paper of van Houtum & van Der Velde (2003) is evidence that commuting numbers practically have not changed: the median level of cross-border commuters in the EU at the beginning of the millennium was 1,5%. Even that number is largely skewed by Luxemburg, which is apparent from the data presented in the research. The share of cross-border commuters in total regional employment in the Belgian-Dutch region was 0,67%. As for more recent data, Broersma et al. find that “*cross-border commuting is a relatively small-scale phenomenon, which involves generally less than 1% of the employed labour force living in NUTS-2 border regions of the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium*” (Broersma et al., 2020, p. 18). However, the problem is even more nuanced. In November 2020, less than one year ago, CBS for the first time gathered detailed information about people who work in the Netherlands but live in Belgium or Germany, which shed light on the commuting between these countries.

According to the CBS, commuters are likely to live in small municipalities just across the borderline, concentrating along the Dutch border of Noord-Brabant and Limburg. Meanwhile, taking a closer look reveals that in the municipality of Baarle-Hertog 22% of residents commute to the Netherlands, in 5 other municipalities on the Belgian side of the border it is 10% or more, while in total there are 25 municipalities with 2% or more of commuters (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020). So, commuters are not distributed evenly across the Belgian part of the border region.

Next, there are more commuters from Belgium to the Netherlands than vice-versa, roughly 41 000 and 12 000 respectively. Broersma et al. (2020) conclude from an economics point of view that it happens due to differences in wages and competitiveness levels of different regions in the border area. People are unlikely to commute if they reside in a competitive region, which means they can find a higher-wage job. However, it seems that is only partially true.

According to the CBS, these commuters from Belgium are “likely to have” Dutch nationality and just happen to live across the border, while continuing to work in the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020). According to the *Cross-border labor market: beyond Romanticism* (2015), almost half of commuters from Germany are Dutch citizens living abroad, not Germans working in the Netherlands. It seems to be reasonable to assume that such ratio at least would be roughly the same in the case of the Belgian border.

The idea is indirectly further confirmed during the interviews (Flemish government representative, 2021, Noord-Brabant representative, 2021, *Advisor at GIP*, 2021). Several decades ago it was popular among high-income Dutch people to move just across the border in Belgium due to tax advantages and cheaper housing.

Knowing all the above, the following conclusion can be formulated: the number of “true” cross-border commuters is even lower than it seems at the first glance as people are likely to pursue housing opportunities outside of the Netherlands. Combined with the high car dependency, it leads to the concentration of mostly high-skilled commuters along the border, and the real cross-border labour market is even smaller.

The next chapter will present the results of the analysis, and consequently communicate the reasons that explain the reasons behind low levels of commuting and how the situation can be improved.

## 5. Results

This chapter will present the results found during the analysis. The first section presents the outcomes regarding cross-border cooperation in general, while the second section regarding cross-border community specifically.

### 5.1 Analysis of cross-border cooperation on the EU-level

In this part of the Results chapter, the main outcomes are derived from document analysis with some clarifications gained during the interviews. The border in the region is seen by the EU as relatively open, however, the challenges related to cross-border interaction and cooperation are still clearly present. The area for the Interreg VI program (for the MFF period of 2021-2027) is the same as in the previous program period. The area is characterised as coherent, meaning that on both sides of the border opportunities and issues are similar.

#### 5.1.1 Opportunities

##### *Language*

Usually, as was established in the literature review, many see **language** as *the* main obstacle which prevents the development of and hinders cross-border cooperation throughout the EU (*Cross-border cooperation in the EU. Report*, 2020). However, in the case of the Belgian-Dutch border region language is rather an opportunity. Dutch is a commonly spoken in the area of the selected case, which eases communication and facilitates the development of cross-border cooperation (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020).

##### *Basis for economic development*

Next, the border region has a **high population density** which is desirable and offers many advantages from the spatial planning point of view, which are, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover, the area has **good logistics potential**, with cooperating ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp, highways and railroad infrastructure. All of the above is a solid ground for economic development (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020).

Likely as a result of the reasons mentioned in the previous paragraph, **tourism** has been growing over the last few years, which presents both economic and cultural exchange benefits (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *The importance of different country*

*cultures in NL-BE case*, 2019; *Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020). It did not reach its full potential and can be further supported and encouraged by the fact that there is a lot of **common heritage** in the area (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *The importance of different country cultures in NL-BE case*, 2019).

### *Labour market and innovation*

Finally, there is a lot of **well-educated human capital** living in the region (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020). It presents several opportunities at once. For instance, it brings **high innovative capacity**: a lot of innovation in the region is introduced by SMEs and start-ups appearing in the area. Combined with the common language, good logistics and high population density, it is an opportunity for **knowledge exchange**, which will only drive innovation further (*Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020). This opportunity also lines up with the Cohesion Policy goals regarding boosting innovation in the EU.

In addition, there is a **shortage of labour** in some sectors: vacancies for engineering and healthcare are hard to fill. Such mismatch between labour supply and demand negatively affects growth, especially one of SMEs. Cross-border cooperation (and commuting) can help to resolve these issues by linking labour supply and demand, therefore lowering unemployment and bringing more economic growth (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021).

### 5.1.2 Obstacles

As for the obstacles, a number of them have been identified which prevent the development of Belgian-Dutch cross-border collaboration in general.

#### *Differences in culture and government structure*

According to *Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands* (2021), **cultural differences** can hinder cross-border interaction, and the selected case is not an exemption. However, in the Belgian-Dutch border area they seem to be rather small compared to other cross-border cases (*The importance of different country cultures in NL-BE case*, 2019). For instance, only 26% of respondents see it as an issue, and the general level of mutual trust in neighbours is rather high (*Cross-border cooperation in the EU. Report*, 2020).

By contrast, **governmental culture and structure** differ a lot (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Breaking down borders, connecting regions, moving people*, 2017). Actors responsible for similar issues may be located on the different tiers of government

(*Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020). For example, mayors have different responsibilities and powers, which can cause communication problems (*The importance of different country cultures in NL-BE case*, 2019). Moreover, due to the previously mentioned issues, existing administrative cooperation is rather ad-hoc than structural. It lacks sufficient integrity, even though the potential benefits of cross-border cooperation are clear to all parties (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021).

### *Legislation*

Next, there are a lot of **differences in regulation and norms**, and they constitute a major obstacle in many spheres (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *The importance of different country cultures in NL-BE case*, 2019; *Cross-border cooperation in the EU. Report*, 2020; *Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020). For instance, as a result of regulations in Belgium and the Netherlands being different, **tax**, **insurance**, and other **social security** systems also differ, and consequently present a big challenge for the general public. People are often afraid to get in trouble because of taxes or to lose social security. Thus, they are not considering cross-border options (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Breaking down borders, connecting regions, moving people*, 2017; *Cross-border labor market: beyond Romanticism*, 2015).

Moreover, **policy priorities** are different as well (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021). Even though cross-border collaboration might be beneficial, higher tiers of government, who are in charge of policy development and provide funding, are typically not very concerned with the topic. That is why, for example, transport planning in the Turnhout region is done only with the Belgian territory in mind and does not include potential development and connections with the Netherlands (*Turnhout city region representative*, 2021).

Another issue brought by legislative complications is the **recognition of diplomas**. Even though the issue itself is quite blatant, it is hard to overestimate its importance for cross-border commuting. As diplomas of people from neighbouring countries are not mutually recognised, it puts companies in the border regions in the disadvantaged position and hinders possible cross-border labour mobility (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020; *Breaking down borders, connecting regions, moving people*, 2017; *Cross-border labor market: beyond Romanticism*, 2015).

To this day the number of automatically recognised diplomas is very low, and the recognition of the vast majority of them is left completely up to the employer. Moreover, some

positions by law require additional training and evaluation before anyone with a foreign diploma can get the position. This is, of course, a huge obstacle both for an employer and a potential employee. Legislation needs to be adopted to allow the use of the benefits which can be brought by cross-border collaboration (*The importance of different country cultures in NL-BE case*, 2019).

### *Information-related issues*

Obstacles related to information include a whole set of different setbacks. **Information asymmetry** is among the most important ones which prevent cross-border collaborations (*Cross-border labor market: beyond Romanticism*, 2015). For instance, often governmental stakeholders are not aware of previously mentioned legal differences, which can be a cause of setbacks (*Breaking down borders, connecting regions, moving people*, 2017). Moreover, there is a **lack of awareness among citizens** about cross-border options (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Breaking down borders, connecting regions, moving people*, 2017). For example, only 21% of respondents know about cross-border activities in the selected region, and even that number has fallen compared to the previous evaluation (*Cross-border cooperation in the EU. Report*, 2020). Additionally, people lack information about working abroad, fearing taxation and social security issues, thus not even considering cross-border work. As a result, information asymmetry or lack of information exchange can prevent the development of cross-border integration.

### *Mobility*

Finally, **public transportation** in the region is not optimal, and the lack of adequate public transport is a constraint to economic growth (*Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020). Usually it is well-organised within but not between countries, as proper public transportation requires structural changes to allow cross-border commuting. For example, there is a split of responsibilities between federal and regional governments regarding railroads and highways, which further complicates the organisation (*Breaking down borders, connecting regions, moving people*, 2017).

To be more specific, the existing bus connection is inadequate: there are not enough routes, service frequencies are low, people need for transfer at the border (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020). On top of that, there are many “missing links”: connections that are needed but do not exist at the moment. Moreover, there is no good information about public transportation, no integrated

tariffs, tickets themselves are hard to acquire (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021).

Additionally, there is a lot of train congestion, as in overloaded system freight and passenger traffic share the same infrastructure (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021). Moreover, railroads differ infrastructure-wise, using different voltage and safety systems (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027*, 2020).

### 5.1.3 Solutions

In order to overcome barriers to cross-border cooperation in the region, several proposed solutions have been found in the analysed data.

#### *Financial incentives*

**Interreg funds** are seen as a way to stimulate cross-border developments in the region. EU funds are needed to start the energy transition and help to combat climate change. This is especially relevant for the selected area, as many industries in which the region specialises are facing a challenge of greening and adaptation (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021). Moreover, such an approach allows achieving two goals at once, as it both **supports business** in the area as well as contributes to **resolving climate change**. Additionally, environmental issues are also a universal topic for all stakeholders, which allows them to set mutual goals and reach them more easily (*The importance of different country cultures in NL-BE case*, 2019).

#### *Targeting actual change and action*

The next idea states that all future Interreg **projects must meet and bear clear social needs**. Over the years enough research and innovation have been done. More focus on finding solutions is needed, not just identification of the problems. More **business engagement** is desirable, alongside with creation of new opportunities for **physical investment and development**. Such an approach will allow people to see the impacts of European policies more directly, which would bring a whole set of positive externalities, making a clear contribution to socio-economic development (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021).

### *Priority change*

**Policy priorities** should be changed to favour cross-border cooperation in the selected region (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021). Presently, all state policies are oriented and created with the national state in mind only (*Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen*, 2021). Because of that, even smaller developments on the lowest level might not be possible, as they are not in line with the established national policy.

### *Embracing the results*

For the successful development of cross-border cooperation it is necessary to find a way to **support the outcomes** of the programs after they end (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021; *Breaking down borders, connecting regions, moving people*, 2017). In many cases it is not clear what happens with the results and achievements of the projects after EU financing is gone. According to the *Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen* (2021), when a project shuts down, Interreg funds are no longer available, thus the achieved results cannot be maintained.

### *Public transportation*

The development of **better cross-border public transportation** brings several benefits for the border area. It can facilitate the creation of a common labour market, as it will allow easier travel between countries. It also increases cross-border activity in general as it allows leisure travel (*Area analysis Interreg VI Flanders-Netherlands*, 2021).

#### 5.1.4 Sub-conclusion

Several conclusions which can be drawn from the analysis of the Belgian-Dutch cross-border cooperation as a whole. Stakeholders on the European level are aware of both of the opportunities, obstacles, as well as propose solutions to them. The set of opportunities and obstacles is rather consistent among the analysed data, which is a good sign for the reliability of this thesis.

However, as it can be seen, mentioned opportunities are mostly related to economic development. Even though lowering unemployment is socially beneficial, and tourism development leads to cultural exchange, it is hard to ignore that, in the end, both of them contribute to the economic side of the question. This likely happens because economic development, unlike social and cultural, is easy to track and measure. Cohesion Policy goals are as well based on economic metrics.

Meanwhile, many obstacles are related to the governmental domain. Differences in legislation and general state organization are the sources of many barriers in one way or another. Cultural differences are seen as important but, again, mostly because they influence the culture of governance. It is closely connected with information-related obstacles. Citizens are not aware neither of the possibilities living close to the border offers nor of the differences in regulation they need to keep in mind to seize such opportunities. Stakeholders are not aware of differences they have, thus, they cannot address them.

Solutions found in the data can be rather viewed as a guideline, as they lack concrete plans or proposals on how to achieve the intended results. For example, it is clearly stated, that Interreg projects need to be supported after the EU funding ends in order to preserve the results. However, there is not even a hint on how that can be achieved.

The process of regional governance in the cross-border region is very different from the ones which are described on a mega-city level. There is no unified legislation, therefore in many cases parties spend most of the time figuring out how to overcome that, which is one of the aims of BENEGO. According to it, in some cases overcoming legal complications resolves the problem nearly to the full extent. Moreover, two different systems, which are not designed to work together, are forced into cooperation. Each of them has to follow different rules, and there is no clear way of conflict-resolution as they are not related like municipal and provincial government in a nation-state. Understanding cross-border cooperation on the EU level is extremely important to achieve anything on the lowest level.

## 5.2 Analysis of cross-border commuting in the Dutch-Belgian case study

This chapter focuses specifically on the analysis of labour mobility and commuting for the selected case. Interviews served as the main source of data for the analysis. Currently, Flanders and the Netherlands chose four key areas, or “axes”, for their cross-border cooperation: innovation, sustainable energy, environment and resources, labour. Innovation is considered to be the most important area. From 2014 to 2020, the program received 152 million euros from ERDF, 10% of which are used for labour. Netherlands collaboration highlights the best twelve projects, two of them being related to labour. In general, since the beginning of 2016, 85 projects were initiated in the selected region, 12 of them are related to labour (Interreg Vlaanderen-Nederland, n.d.). Thus, it can be concluded that the broad topic of labour is seen as important, however, it is definitely not of the highest priority.

### 5.2.1 Opportunities

#### *Language*

As in the previous section, it is recognised that usually, **language differences** are a major obstacle for cross-border cooperation in general and cross-border mobility specifically. However, in the case of the Belgian-Dutch border, it is rather seen as a great opportunity, which should facilitate cross-border communication and cooperation (*Professor of Economic Geography, 2021; Noord-Brabant representative, 2021*). It is needed to note that some parts of Limburg speak German or French dialect, so it may not apply to them as much as to Noord-Brabant (*Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen, 2021*).

#### *Labour market and innovation*

Yet again **innovation** domain is considered as important for the EU as a whole, and that is why innovation itself should not stop at the border. Technology companies and start-ups require scale to operate, as there is no point in developing a product if the market size is too small. Increased and eased labour mobility in the region can help companies to embrace and promote innovation, while cross-border integration creates a larger market to operate in. Also, such innovations as e-bikes can make cross-border commuting more feasible for people without a car, both promoting cross-border commuting and sustainable solutions (*Noord-Brabant representative, 2021*).

Stakeholders see **knowledge exchange** both as an economic opportunity and as a possibility to share the vast experience cooperation has with other EU regions. It is important both for the development of border regions as it leads to innovation, but also for cross-border

cooperation itself. According to the *Noord-Brabant representative* (2021), the Belgian-Dutch border region has been sharing a lot of expertise acquired during the years of the program's existence with many other European countries and border areas.

### *Cultural differences*

Finally, it is needed to discuss the role of **cultural differences** in the selected case. The views on the topic of interviewees working in the field are conflicting. Even though there seems to be a consensus that they do exist, some claim that cultural differences are small and can be overcome. Thus, it can be rather seen as an opportunity to facilitate development (*Noord-Brabant representative, 2021; Advisor at GIP, 2021; Flemish government representative, 2021*). However, others see them as a real obstacle, or even one of the main barriers, because cultures in Belgium and in the Netherlands differ significantly (see 5.2.2).

## 5.2.2 Obstacles

### *Cultural differences*

*Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen* (2021) sees cultural differences between Belgium and the Netherlands more as an obstacle and not as an opportunity. He stands that **differences in culture** between neighbouring states are significant, even though they were not so great in the past. As an example, he believes that the cultural influence of the nation-state made Limburg more "Dutch", even though initially it was more "German". However, this is likely to be the case for the Limburg specifically, and does not apply to Noord-Brabant.

Still, the *BENEGO representative* (2021) also believes that there is enough difference to hamper cooperation. He studied culture in both countries, and in his research, he concludes that they are significant and must be taken into account. Even if they cannot be seen at the first glance, according to his results, cultural differences still hamper cooperation a lot. In the Netherlands economy more trust-based and power distance is smaller, while Belgium has a more masculine culture and is more willing to avoid uncertainty.

### *Differences in government culture and structure*

The next issue is related to the previous obstacle. It can be stated that the biggest **difference** between the two countries lies in the **government domain**. It concerns both cultural and structural dimensions, and interviews allowed us to have a closer view of them.

Specifically, in terms of government culture, Belgium is more bureaucratic and hierarchical compared to the Netherlands. Meanwhile, the Dutch working culture is more assertive (*Advisor at GIP, 2021*). Structurally governments are very different as well. For

example, in some cases the same governmental entities bear different responsibilities. Or in some sectors the sheer size of the government is smaller, so it does not have enough resources for all the projects it would like to undertake (*Noord-Brabant representative, 2021; BENEKO representative, 2021*).

### *Legal*

Another crucial obstacle is the fact that generally law is against cross-border labour-mobility and commuting. There are **administrative difficulties, differences in laws and regulations** (*Noord-Brabant representative, 2021; BENEKO representative, 2021*). They need to be levelled in both countries to make it easier for the people to commute to the neighbouring state (*Advisor at GIP, 2021*). Governmental differences lead to structural problems and make cooperation more difficult (*Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen, 2021*). In Belgium, for instance, railways are under the control of higher tiers of government, while local governments are responsible for trams and buses. Moreover, the last word on the matter is always by the national government (*Flemish government representative, 2021*).

Consequently, the main issue that prevents cross-border commuting and labour mobility in the region specifically is the fact that the country of employment defines the law regarding **insurance, unemployment, social security**, child care, etc. (*Professor of Economic Geography, 2021; Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen, 2021; BENEKO representative, 2021*). People are often averse by such differences in national legislation, as they fear getting in trouble because of incorrectly paid taxes or lack of social security (*Advisor at GIP, 2021*).

Additionally, governments have **different ambitions and goals**, and they use them to create policies. For example, improving train connections in the cross-border region is on the agenda, however, the Belgian government does not see it as a priority. It always was more car-oriented and it simply does not have the budget for it, as existing policies are oriented on infrastructure development only within the state (*Noord-Brabant representative, 2021*). In general, there is little desire to put a lot of energy into creating connections between countries. They are perceived as they do not matter because few people actually can use such connections, while resources are limited and can be better utilised in the home country (*Flemish government representative, 2021*).

### *Information-related issues*

Next, there is a problem of information asymmetry and availability. For instance, often **citizens do not know** they have **options** to work abroad. Generally, it is just not in the mindset of people. For example, the majority of the Dutch unemployed are not aware that they can find

a job using Belgian governmental service, even though Belgians cannot do that in the Netherlands (*Advisor at GIP, 2021*).

This issue also holds true for **diploma recognition**. Employers have no information on the reliability of degrees as universities and programs do not level (*Advisor at GIP, 2021*). For example, the role of midwives at childbirth became strikingly different in Belgium and in the Netherlands during the XX century. Even if a person from Belgium holds the same diploma, the functions of a midwife differ drastically in two countries, meaning one cannot not be employed in neighbouring country without additional qualification (Gooris & Hingstman, n.a.).

### *Public transportation*

The last major obstacle standing in the way of cross-border commuting is **public transportation** (*Professor of Economic Geography, 2021*). Currently, there are only three railroad connections between the countries, many delays and no smooth transitions. A bus is not an option as well, as existing ones are too slow. It is easier to commute by car, and the vast majority of people do that. According to *Advisor at GIP (2021)*, many Dutch persons decline vacancies in Belgium because they think they will need a car for commuting, as the public transport situation is terrible.

Additionally, railroad companies inflate prices on international tickets, or people have to buy two different tickets in each country (*Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen, 2021; Noord-Brabant representative, 2021; Flemish government representative, 2021*). Tickets can also be hard to get; for example, as a Belgian you need a Dutch bank account to obtain *OV-chipkaart* (Dutch travel card). This way commuting on a relatively short distance becomes very expensive. Moreover, the connection is not frequent with no alternative routes (*Noord-Brabant representative, 2021*). Also, as public transport is often financed by the national state, it will avoid funding and investing to run the system in another country too (*Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen, 2021*).

Next, the connections inside Belgium are not as good as in the Netherlands. Flanders are less urbanised compared to the Netherlands, more car-oriented, so there is no reason for Dutch people to take public transport if using a car is easier. The same applies to Belgian people going to the Netherlands (*Flemish government representative, 2021*).

Finally, trains in the Netherlands and Belgium use different voltages; thus, the locomotive must be changed on the border, or a special locomotive is required. That, in turn, leads to numerous delays and results in unreliable connections. Safety and other systems are also different (*City of Antwerp representative, 2021*).

### 5.2.3 Solutions

Several solutions have been identified which are seen as viable by the stakeholders.

#### *Coordination and communication*

First, it is obvious that **more coordination between governments** is needed. The biggest setback is the lack of governmental cooperation between different states. Also, not many people work with cross-border related issues, even though it slowly gets better over time. Coordination is necessary both for small everyday things, like snow clearing, as well as more abstract and complex matters, like improving the innovative capacity of the region. For example, there is no point in building a high-tech high-speed railway if it terminates at the border. Such projects cannot be realised without the close cooperation of the states (*Noord-Brabant representative, 2021*).

Next, improved communication helps to promote and sustain cross-border **personal relations**. They are important for the development of cross-border commuting and cooperation in general. Moreover, even more work can be done to improve communication between governments: so they know and understand each other better. That can also help to acknowledge and accept the fact that differences do exist, and thus help to overcome them (*Noord-Brabant representative, 2021*).

It is also necessary to communicate information more clearly to the general public. **People need to be informed** more about cross-border cooperations and about what kind of opportunities they offer. This will allow reducing the fear of taxes and social security, for example (*Advisor at GIP, 2021*).

#### *Embracing the results*

The next issue relates to the way cross-border programs and projects are organised, as the topic of supporting achievements appears yet again. Essentially, it is true that Cohesion Policy and Interreg support the development of cross-border cooperations via the implementation of projects, and there are a lot of possibilities to resolve the cross-border issues. However, all EU projects are limited in terms of time and budget. *Project — done, budget — gone*. **Outcomes of projects need support** because when a project is finished, it no longer receives financing, which means it cannot be sustained, as the local government, who is the main beneficiary of such projects, just cannot afford it (*Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen, 2021*).

### *Public transportation*

Finally, as was already mentioned, many stakeholders mention the issues of proper cross-border **public transportation**. At the same time, they also admit that it is unclear how such an issue can be addressed, as there is no adequate source of financing for it. That is confirmed by the *Flemish government representative* (2021), according to him, there were some experiments with cross-border buses in the past. However, although the public wanted and enjoyed it, they were extremely unprofitable and not viable in the long run. At the moment governments have neither money nor desire to experiment with it again.

#### 5.2.4 Sub-conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the Belgian-Dutch cross-border cooperation specifically in terms of labour mobility and commuting. Stakeholders on the lower level generally also see cross-border cooperation as a source of opportunity. They also clearly articulate problems which stand in the way and propose solutions, some of which, however, are rather vague and general.

Interviewees name more or less the same opportunities and obstacles. But unlike on the European level, economic development is not mentioned as an opportunity at all, which should be expected, as it is more of a concern on a macro level. In general, not many opportunities are specifically formulated: common language should facilitate cooperation, while labour market integration can lead to innovation and knowledge exchange.

As for the obstacles, most of them are related to governmental differences in structure or culture or information asymmetry in one way or another. These two topics can be called a general source of trouble for cross-border interaction, and stakeholders recognise it.

It should be noted, however, that there is no agreement on the status of cultural differences. The majority of the respondents agree that they exist but see them as rather small and not harmful for cross-border cooperation. Meanwhile, others believe that Belgian and Dutch cultures differ significantly, and that is one of the most important obstacles for cross-border interaction.

The importance of public transportation is heavily highlighted as well among many interviews. However, it is not clear what can be done in that regard. Flanders is developing its own metropolitan network of cities, within a small commuting distance from one another. Dutch cities are further away, so it is hard and makes little sense to develop with them in mind. There are some specialist jobs which make people work in a neighbouring country but overall

they represent a very small portion of the working population, and thus there is a very small amount of commuters. Communities to the North of Antwerp commute the most and represent a disproportionately large percentage of the population who works in the Netherlands, however, the population itself is extremely small compared to metropolitan areas. Thus, the actual amount of commuters is negligible, and it makes no sense to support them and create a bus connection, for example. Yes, there is a theoretical opportunity that can be seized but there are too few people living in the area for it to come true. There are opportunities to develop such connections in Belgian Limburg, as it is less developed compared to the Dutch Limburg, so people can commute to work there. (*Flemish government representative, 2021*)

Again, there are no clear proposed solutions. Stakeholders highlight the importance of communication and coordination, as it can help tackle the main issues they face: lack of government coordination, resolving administrative differences, and general contribution to mutual understanding. The same applies to other topics: it is agreed that project results need support after Interreg funding is gone and that public transportation in the region needs to be fixed, alas, there are no concrete ideas how exactly it can be done and who is going to pay for it.

Data from the interview analysis also confirms that cross-border governance differs significantly from the typical case of regional governance. Stakeholders agree that differences in legislation are specifically hard to work with. At the same time, they are forced to think in terms of national context first and foremost, even if they see opportunities in cross-border cooperation.

### 5.3 Conclusion: cross-border cooperation and regional governance

#### *Top-down approach to Belgian-Dutch cross-border cooperation*

In general, mobility and coordination between countries improved over the last two decades. The process, however, is very slow, as the topic of cross-border mobility does not attract a lot of attention from the policy-makers at the moment, being in the background.

One of the reasons behind that is that all the systems are organized from the national point of view, which is natural. However, because of that, they limit the development of cross-border interactions. Countries are interested in cross-border developments as they see them as a source of opportunity but likely they will prioritise the interests of the nation-state, if possible. For example, a lack of the quality, affordable, and sustainable connections across the Belgian-Dutch border is apparent. Public transport in the region requires structural changes in favour cross-border commuting. However, it is not entirely clear how to address such a situation: public transportation is mostly not profitable and financed by the state. It is reasonable from the governmental point of view not to finance the development of and support public transportation in another country while figuring out who benefits in what proportion from it.

Higher levels of government mostly approach cross-border cooperation through the lenses of economic opportunities. It is seen as a way to enhance economic growth in underdeveloped areas. On the European level it is also seen both as an opportunity to develop lagging behind regions and to promote the agenda and values of the EU. It should not be surprising as policies require clear objectives, and economic changes are easier to track and assess objectively compared to social and cultural development.

#### *Bottom-up view on Belgian-Dutch cross-border cooperation*

Stakeholders on the lower lever articulate problems significantly more clear, facing many obstacles and often not having the means to resolve them. They are able not only to name them in general but also to pinpoint the exact issues which need to be solved to improve cross-border cooperation and labour mobility.

Legal and administrative differences along with information asymmetry are seen as one the main issues which prevent cross-border cooperations from developing. They require a lot of resources to overcome them which actors often do not have. National regulations need to be changed to make cross-border cooperation easier, but it is hard because this issue is very political. It is hard to alter legislation for a few low populated municipalities to benefit from it, so they often have to try finding workarounds. Either of the options is a very long process. For instance, it took years for BENEGO to reach an agreement regarding the shared use of

ambulances just between Noord-Brabant and Antwerp, even though a similar agreement exists between Belgian and Dutch Limburg for an even longer period (*BENEGO representative*, 2021). Another example, social security, health insurance, taxes are the barriers people are afraid of. Legislation regarding them cannot be easily changed, however, people can be informed more about them and thus be helped to overcome them.

However, even if different levels of government have similar ideas on what should be done, the means can still be contradictory. The whole process may become even more complicated if higher tiers of government do not see it as a priority worth spending resources on. Public transportation is a great example of that: everyone agrees that it is necessary to improve the current state as it is a major obstacle, however, there is no consensus on how to achieve that. Small border municipalities require help from provinces or other bigger entities, as they do not have enough resources, while the latter does not see it as a good use of funds. That is why, in the end, actors on a lower level have to act in accordance with higher-level agenda.

### *Organizing cross-border governance*

It can be concluded that cross-border governance is a complicated matter. Even with favouring preconditions, like common language and similar culture, organizing it is not a simple task. The connection between higher and lower levels does exist in the selected case. It can be concluded that knowledge of micro level is essential for the development on macro level. Cooperation cannot be further advanced without addressing specific obstacles stakeholders are facing.

The complications that have been identified are presented in the following paragraphs.

First, many obstacles and opportunities are indeed connected. For instance, there are regulatory bottlenecks for the development of public transportation due to different policy priorities and administrative organizations. Thus, there is a lack of cross-border public transit in the region, which, in turn, it hampers both cultural interaction and possible positive externalities from the metropolitan effect.

Next, when it comes to cross-border collaboration, a collision of interests is possible not only between nation states but also within them, between micro and macro levels. In general, cross-border labour mobility is not an issue in the view of national governments, as mainly lower tiers are interested in it. For example, unemployment in more remote and border areas is higher, and that is a concern for the provincial government of Limburg, as young people prefer to move to Randstad. Meanwhile, the German city of Köln is bigger than Amsterdam and

located twice as close, being within a reasonable distance for commuting. However, the border is still in place, there is no common labour market and cross-border mobility is low (due to the previously mentioned reasons). The central government would prefer a person to contribute to the development of a large metropolitan area within the state, while the province and municipality would prefer a person to maintain a place of living and commute to another country for work (*Policy Advisor Sittard-Geleen*, 2021). The same logic applies to the issue of diploma recognition or public transportation: these issues require a lot of resources to overcome them which cannot be provided on the micro level. At the same time, it is not clear whether it is worth it and makes sense in general on a macro level.

Territoriality of the states exists, even if it is not created on purpose. There are differences in national legislation, in priorities of the states, in government culture and structure, and countries themselves are not willing to change that as it is extremely complicated and very political, will not be popular with most of the people. More importantly, stakeholders are mostly aware of cultural and administrative differences and are working to overcome them and with them in mind. Such an approach seems valid: even if territoriality evolves and fades away over time, that process is long and uncertain. *“Barriers will always be there, because the way in which the Netherlands and the neighboring countries are decorated differs from each other”* (*Breaking down borders, connecting regions, moving people*, 2017). However, stakeholders can and should act with them in mind, solve problems and seize the opportunities today.

It also might be difficult to find a source of funding to develop the cross-border area. As it was already mentioned, many opportunities require financial means to seize them. Again, it is not clear where such funds would come from. Financing is also crucial for preserving achievements. This statement is universally agreed on: it is needed to find a way to keep the momentum which Interreg projects launch, as many results disappear when the funding ends.

Moreover, proper financing alone is not enough. Political will and commitment is needed for the development of cross-border interactions, as many issues require not just financing but also administrative and other resources in order to resolve them. For example, differences in legislation cannot be solved with grants alone. Having a common aim is helpful. Grants can help to seize the opportunities, but they can only do so much.

Finally, it is clear that when it comes to cross-border cooperation there are no universal solutions. Experience of other cross-border interactions is crucially important in general. However, it seems that many cases require a custom approach as there are too many different variables.

## 6. Conclusion and discussion

This chapter will present summarised findings of this thesis, answering research questions. Additionally, the limitations of this research are discussed.

### 6.1 Conclusions

The first research question can be answered: *What are the currently known obstacles preventing cross-border cooperation in general and in the selected commuting case?* It was found that there are many known obstacles that can prevent the development of cross-border cooperation. It is crucial to note, however, that academia and practitioners recognise slightly different sets of barriers, and most of them are social or institutional.

In general, many problems regarding cross-border interactions originate from differences in legal regulations and other norms between countries, which lead to many other issues. That includes differences in governmental structure and responsibilities, taxation and social security, recognition of diplomas, etc. Cultural differences also play a role but the extent of such influence is not universally agreed on. More importantly, culture seems to shape both the structure of and the way the government is functioning.

Language barrier in general is a big obstacle, but it does not exist in the selected case. Information exchange is still a significant issue that prevents both successful inter-governmental cooperation as well as cross-border labour mobility.

The issue of lack of funding is present as well but not in the sense that not enough means are allocated for development. Lack of financing in the selected case means there are no funds to support achieved results after the Interreg program is not functioning anymore.

Lack of public transport is a major barrier for the development of cross-border cooperation in general and commuting specifically. It is a result of the differences in regulation, lack of financing, and lack of information.

As can be seen, obstacles standing in the way of successful cross-border cooperation are significant but it does not mean there are no ways to make the best out of the situation. Thus, to answer the second research question: *What are the perceived opportunities for cross-border development in general and in the selected commuting case?*

The selected case of the Belgian-Dutch border seems to have a lot of favourable preconditions, which can and should serve as opportunities to develop the cross-border area. To begin with, the usage of common language is extremely important for the development of

cross-border relations. It is hard to overestimate the importance of the ability to communicate in the usual way for actors involved. They do not have to resolve to speak a foreign language, which might be complicated for some people or to use translation services, which depletes budget. The language barrier is one of the main obstacles both for other cross-border cooperations programs and for people who want to make use of cross-border integration. In addition to that, the region on the selected case has a rich and long history of cooperation (e.g., BENEGO organization); past experiences potentially help to avoid pitfalls and smoothen the process.

Aside from that, most opportunities are for general economic development: the selected region has good logistics and tourism potential. Moreover, the region of the selected case also has a high innovative capacity and potential for labour market integration, which would allow filling some vacancies and contribute to (innovative) economic growth.

Knowing obstacles and opportunities which are presented in the cross-border region, leads to an answer for the third research question: *What is specific to regional governance in the cross-border areas?*

There are several important elements that stand out when in cross-border regional governance. Ideas from the theoretical chapter 2.1 are confirmed: the first challenge is an immensely increased complexity of the administrative environment. Cross-border activities involve several levels of government. Not just within the state but also in the neighbouring country, as well as representatives of the EU, private, and other entities (e.g., see Figure 2). The sheer number of stakeholders involved is significantly larger compared to mega-city regional governance.

However, it is not just a number of actors that complicates cross-border governance. The structure, culture of governments, planning traditions also differ significantly. Consequently, as an example, actors bearing the same position are responsible for different matters, in addition to having different working and management cultures and processes.

Lastly, communication between all actors is more complicated in the case of cross-border governance. It happens both because of different governmental organisations and language barriers, even if it is not a case in the studied region.

After factoring in the opportunities, obstacles, and features of cross-border regional governance, it is possible to answer the fourth research question: *What can be done to improve cross-border labour mobility in the Belgian-Dutch region?*

There are several most important ways to seize the opportunities and overcome obstacles in the selected case. First, they include a change in legal matters. Namely, the overall policy priority needs to be shifted to favour cross-border development and do not lock actors in the national context. Cross-border aims and policies should also target actual visible change and tangible actions, so both governments and the general public can see clear benefits. Some parts of national legislation might need to be altered to allow the successful development of cross-border cooperation.

Next, finding financial means and political will to facilitate and support cross-border activities is also crucial. Additionally, improvements in communication and information availability also can significantly foster cross-border developments.

Finally, increased quality of cross-border public transportation contributes to general cross-border cooperation development and facilitates cross-border commuting. However, it also depends on resolving some of the previously mentioned obstacles.

The above all leads to answering the main research question of this thesis: *How cross-border setting of regional governance complicates development of cross-border labour mobility between Belgium and the Netherlands?*

As it was established, opportunities for cross-border development in general and for commuting specifically do exist, and they can bring benefits for the area in question. But overall it is not an easy task to do. The opportunities themselves are known but still can be too vague for lower tiers of governments to grasp and undertake concrete actions. Many obstacles on the way to seize and realise such opportunities have been identified, some of them are known for a long time.

What is important, however, is that the source for the majority of them lies in the nature of cross-border cooperation itself. Many barriers cannot be resolved easily. For some, it is unclear whether they can be resolved at all. Meanwhile, there are not many solutions that can be seen as realistic at the moment. Most of them in one way or another require either an enormous political will, to change the agenda, for example, or a source of additional financial means, meanwhile, micro and macro levels can have very different agendas, goals and resources.

All of the previously mentioned prevents the development of cross-border commuting and labour mobility, even if theoretically it should bring benefits for the cross-border region. In the end, it can be seen that for an outsider setting of cross-border regional governance may be unexpectedly complicated, rightfully so.

The future is uncertain, so are the yields from additional resources put in the cross-border cooperation and commuting. All of this does not mean, however, that idea of cross-border cooperation and commuting is worthless. On the contrary, it can be quite beneficial for all parties involved. It is not an accident that the EU has grounds to view Interreg as a generally successful program. Still, it requires a thoughtful and careful approach to address or find a way around difficulties barring of future developments.

## 6.2 Discussion

This section will discuss the results of the thesis from the point of view of scientific relevance, mention unexpected findings, and provide recommendations for future research.

### *Scientific relevance*

The results of this research might be applicable for the further development of the cross-border governance concept, both within the EU and outside of it. By casting light on the selected case of cross-border cooperation and governance, it might contribute to a better understanding of supranational governance in general.

This thesis contributed several findings to the academia on the topic of cross-border regional governance and cross-border commuting. Most importantly, it was uncovered and described in great detail what the obstacles are which stand in the way of cross-border cooperation generally and commuting in particular. Moreover, the obstacles were not only identified, but also the reasons which create such obstacles in the first place were unveiled. It was highlighted as well how many of them are connected with one another or have a similar origin.

This thesis also contributed to the discussion on regional governance, specifically to the case of cross-border regions in the EU. Specific characteristics of cross-border regional governance have been identified, as well as how exactly they complicate cross-border cooperation and commuting.

### *Unexpected insights*

Several findings have been identified and yet were not present in the scientific literature on the topic. First, from the literature, it is not clear how deeply differences in social and institutional settings can affect and prevent the development of cross-border integration. Second, although there are many potential issues and topics related to cross-border cooperation, all of them more or less fall into very few categories, like differences in government structure and legislation or information-related issues (i.e., its unavailability or lack of communication).

Finally, Interreg projects generally can and do produce good results, which support the development of the border regions. However, more attention needs to be drawn to the fact of what happens after the Interreg-related project is over, how the results can be kept in place.

#### *Limitations and recommendations for future research*

The topic of cross-border governance and labour mobility is still not fully researched, even though over the last decades many papers regarding cross-border cooperation have been published. Even less so in the case of cross-border labour mobility and commuting, both within and outside of the EU.

Concerning methodology, the research can be further improved in a few ways. For instance, more diversity of the respondents and documents analysed can increase the validity of the research. Furthermore, instead of focusing on one region, a multiple-case study can be conducted, which would help to understand what characteristics are universal for many cross-border interactions. Moreover, in this thesis cross-border commuting was a topic in the centre of attention, but there are many more which might be a subject for research. Furthermore, different regions have different issues and agendas. For instance, the topic of healthcare also seems to be important in border regions (ageing population and youth migration), as well as exploiting the potential for economic development and boosting innovation.

The main limitation of this paper is that it is targeted towards the research of the governance within the EU. This should not be overlooked since at this moment the EU is the only supranational organization of its kind, which brings a large set of additional restrictions and opportunities not applicable in the other parts of the world. The cross-border governance issues are certainly not unique in general, however, the environment provided by the EU certainly makes it stand out, so the reliability of this research may vary. Still, part of the EU's Interreg functionality and experience can be used in regional policies or other federative governments, e.g., to develop regional initiatives or to stimulate local governments.

For the same reason, the results of this research are also expected to be relevant mainly within the European context. Moreover, since the primary research method is the use of a case study, it brings in all corresponding potential drawbacks of this method. For instance, the results might be not applicable even for other cases within the EU due to the difference in geography or institutional, political, and social backgrounds.

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Appendix 1. Original table by Olszewski (2016).

**Table no 1:** Obstacles to cross-border cooperation

OBSTACLE	EŚCPL <sup>a</sup>	EŚCCZ <sup>a</sup>
Different regulations and legal norms on both sides of the border	1.38	1.57
Lack of an equal foreign partner	0.43	0.00
Complex procedure for applying for funds	0.86	1.29
Limited number of offers for cooperation with foreign institutions	0.14	0.00
Lack of appropriate institutions dealing with cross-border cooperation	0.10	0.14
Different organisational structures of institutions which want to cooperate with each other	0.81	0.93
Lack of cooperation competence in the institutions	0.05	0.50
Insufficiently developed information system concerning cooperation opportunities	0.10	0.50
Lack of financial means for cooperation with partners	1.95	1.71
Low efficiency of a financial settlement system of projects	1.05	1.57
Asymmetry in the level of economic development of cooperating institutions	0.24	0.07
Dissimilarity of economic systems on both sides of the border	0.29	0.57
Insufficient knowledge of the partner's language	1.05	1.36
Negative stereotypes of the neighbours	0.76	1.43
Historical reasons	0.52	0.79
Intercultural barriers	0.86	0.64
Anxiety about an inflow of foreign capital	0.05	0.00
Long distance between cooperating institutions	1.00	0.00
Differences in development planning, transport infrastructure	0.14	0.36
Natural obstacles (mountains, rivers...)	0.10	0.29

Obstacle:		
0.00	no obstacles	
0.01-0,25	Very little	
0.26-0.50	little	
0.51-0.75	little	
0.76-1.00	little	
1.01-1.25	medium	
1.26-1.50	medium	
1.51-1.75	medium	
1.76-2.00	medium	
2.01-2.25	big	
2.26-2.50	big	
2.51-2.75	big	
2.76-3.00	very big	

Appendix 2. Interview transcripts.

*See the attached document.*