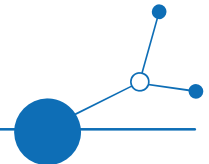


Assessment report on joint challenges and needs



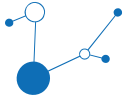
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THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

As a consequence of the EU's progress in integration, the borders of the Central European space have been softening over the last 30 years. As of today, nearly half a million citizens commute across central European borders, and several tens of thousands of inhabitants have chosen municipalities beyond the border as their residence. The mobility of students, cross-border shopping and the cross-border use of (certain) public services are no longer a terra incognita within the programme area.

However, public administration and policies are not yet sufficiently addressing the needs of cross-border communities: Public services and territorial development are rarely designed and offered in an integrated way, legal obstacles impede cross-border public services, and though collaboration at administrative level has much improved, participatory governance approaches involving citizens are still in an infancy stage.

The primary objective of the BorderLabs CE project is to improve the conditions for capacity development at the local and regional levels, with a focus on improving integration between central European countries. The pilot activities address the challenges of three fields, namely: cross-border spatial planning, cross-border participatory governance, and the management of cross-border legal and administrative obstacles. By improving the quality of cooperation through tested tools and instruments, the partners aim to promote cross-border functional ties through which the separating effects of borders can be diminished. The lessons of the project are designed to spread know-how within the programme area to facilitate the cross-border integrated design of public services, the scaling up of existing cross-border governance solutions, and to reduce the effects of diverse legal and administrative systems in Central Europe.

The present document summarises the results of the analysis of the inception reports of the pilot actions and the online survey addressing cross-border structures of the programming area to get to know their capacity development needs in the above-mentioned three fields. The needs assessment is designed to feed into the development of the multimedia learning platform, which will contain digital content referring to these needs and be used as a knowledge sharing tool to achieve the above goals.

RESOURCES

The assessment report is based on two resources: the Inception Reports (IR) of the project pilots and the survey.

Through the **Inception Reports**, the pilot partners were requested to design their activities following the logic of a template, which included the following chapters:

1. Brief introduction of the target area: geographic location, the special characteristics, and cross-border flows of the border area
2. The intervention logic of the PILOT
 - Challenges and needs the PILOT is designed to respond to: the reasoning for the PILOT, based on territorial needs
 - The objectives of the PILOT
 - Planned activities of the PILOT
 - Previous experiences of the partner (relevant for the PILOT)



- Cooperative and participatory approach (the ways and target groups to ensure citizens' engagement in the PILOT)
 - Embeddedness of the PILOT (involvement of the BorderLabs CE partners, Central European relevance of the PILOT, and adaptability of the results in other border areas)
3. Communication of the PILOT
- Target groups of communication
 - Regional (high-level) kick-off event of the PILOT.

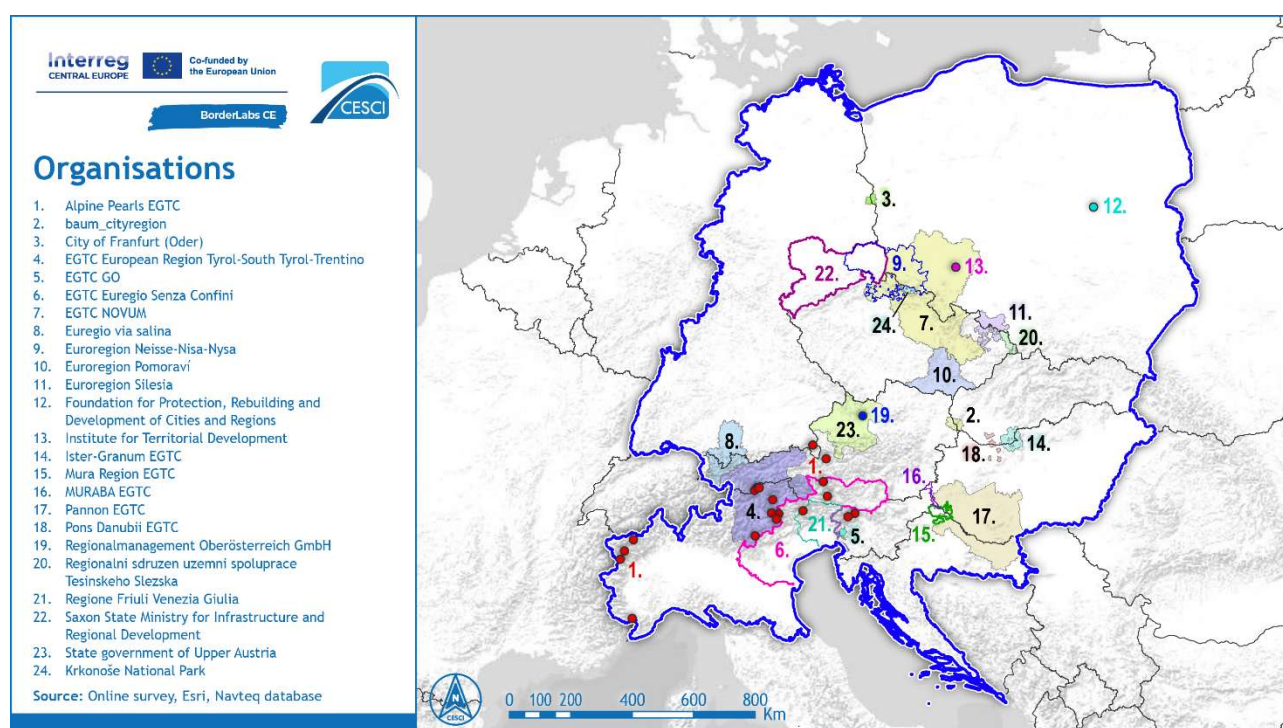
The IRs referred to the past experiences of the partners, the needs and challenges the planned activities are designed to respond to, and they gave orientation towards the professional assistance the partners need to realise their activities.

The template was delivered to the partners at the end of June 2024, with a deadline of November, but some of them were working on the report until the end of January 2025.

The survey was opened in February 2025, and the link was sent to 106 cross-border stakeholders within the programme area: euroregions, EGTCs, twin-cities, and cross-border professional structures. By the end of March, 20 answers arrived, and one structure was represented by two respondents. CESCO, being in charge of the needs assessment, contacted the Managing Authority of the Central Europe programme to advertise the link to the questionnaire, which was also shared via the social media sites of the project. At the partner meeting held in Dresden on 06 May, the project partners were requested to share the link among the structures located in their regions. As a result, by the end of May, 25 responses arrived, from among which one of the questionnaires of the respondent sending the answers twice was filtered out.

The number of respondents is not high (22,6%), but the geographic scope of the cross-border structures represented by the survey covers the programme region quite well: only three border areas (the Polish-Slovak, the Austrian-Hungarian and the Croatian-Slovenian) remained outside of the scope.

Figure 1 - Geographic coverage of the survey respondents





The survey focused on the three subjects of the BorderLabs CE project, collecting evidence of the experiences and the needs of the cross-border actors.

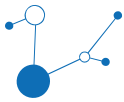
Besides, when drafting the report, we also took into consideration previous experiences and literature, as well as the expert exchanges of the kick-off conference.

The picture cannot be seen as representative, but we aimed to identify the topics and components which would be useful to include in the multimedia learning platform to be delivered by the end of the project.

A. General overview

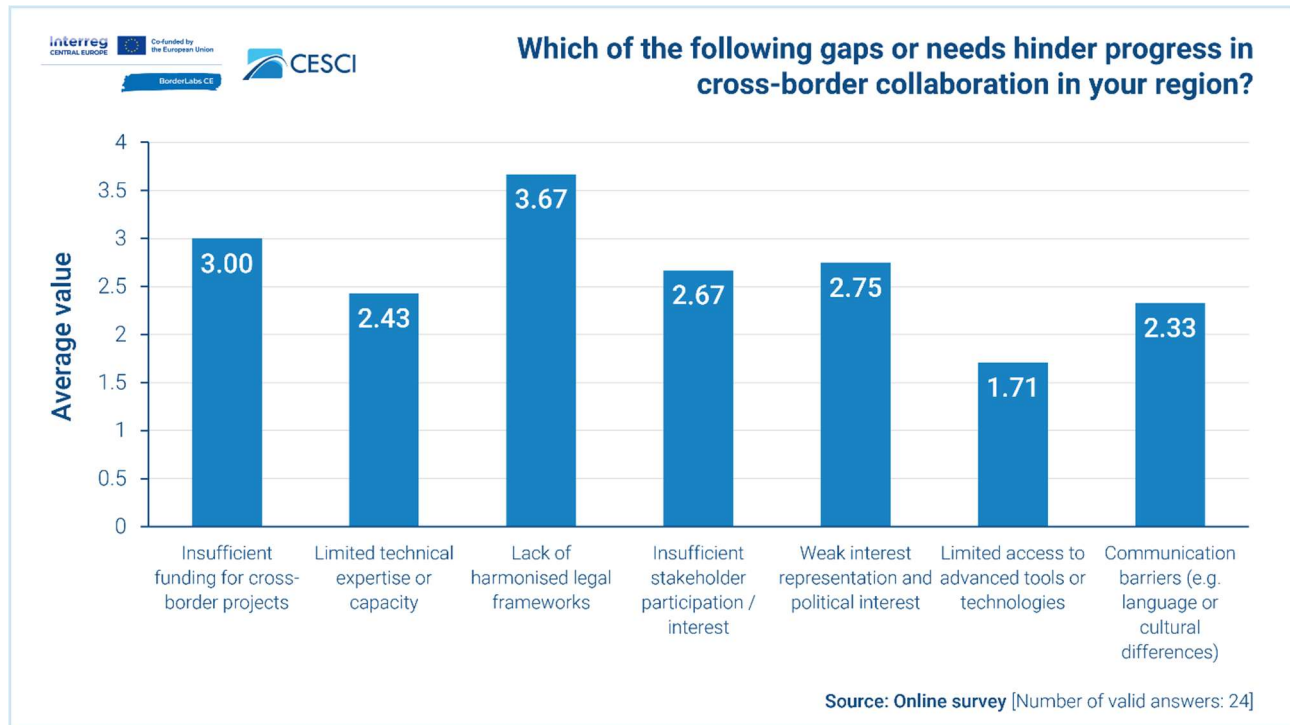
As a result of the assessment of the IRs and the survey questionnaires, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- (1) The biggest challenge for stakeholders of cross-border cooperation in the Central European area is the fragmented administrative and legal frameworks of the region, which generate obstacles to stronger integration.
- (2) Not only are the obstacles of multiple nature, but also their elimination is hindered by the lack of competences at the local and regional level.
- (3) Consequently, there is a need for knowledge of solutions and procedures through which the obstacles can be eliminated; as well as the respondents find it beneficial to have an inventory of the most frequent barriers and the way to address them. The recently adopted *2025/925 EU Regulation on a Border Regions' instrument for development and growth (BRIDGEforEU)* would be a key to tackling these obstacles systematically. However, at the moment of the assessment procedure, in the vast majority of the Central European Member States, it is not clear how the new tool will be applied, if any (its adaptation is not mandatory). [The platform should contain information on typical cross-border obstacles, good practices of their management and information on the adaptation of the BRIDGEforEU tool.](#)
- (4) The shortage of financial resources is also a frequently mentioned problem by the cross-border actors. This phenomenon has multiple roots, from weak financial autonomy of the local municipalities to moderate budget of the cross-border programmes; from the lack of awareness of further EU funds to the lack of interest of the national governments in the special challenges the border citizens face day-to-day. [The planned platform should include an inventory of potential resources beyond the world of Interreg. Reports on successful projects in this context would also help the design of further project proposals.](#)
- (5) The representatives of the cross-border structures often feel neglected by both the decision-makers (at national and EU level) and the everyday citizens living in the territory of the particular structure. Within the EU, there are successful governance models and solutions to involve the politicians, the advocacy organisations and civil society. The BorderLabs CE project aims to share information on these initiatives and improve the conditions for participatory governance. [The planned platform should contain presentations of the good practices and a methodological guide on how to avoid being neglected.](#)
- (6) Cross-border planning already has examples within the programme area. However, the integrated cross-border spatial plans are rather missing, like their methodological background and the institutions which could assist with the delivery of such documents. The stakeholders expressed their interest in contacting expert institutions and other cross-border structures addressing the same challenge. [The platform has to respond to these needs by collecting an inventory of expertise and presenting methods of cross-border strategic design. There is also a need for structured datasets](#)



and GIS maps which are not manageable by the cross-border structures due to their capacity shortages.

Figure 2 - The most frequent barriers to cross-border integration in Central Europe



- (7) The respondents found less relevant the availability of these and similar technical capacities which means that they want to focus on the everyday development tasks, and to procure the expertise from the market. [The platform can assist them in finding the relevant consultancy companies, without distorting the market conditions.](#)
- (8) Interestingly, the cultural and linguistic differences are scored with smaller values: the willingness to cooperate overwrites these differences, and the partners can easily communicate with each other. Their problems occur when they want to intensify their cooperation through planning, governance and overcoming legal barriers. For this, they mostly need contacts with relevant actors and professional knowledge on how to overcome these barriers. These needs clearly define the mission of the planned multimedia learning platform.

B. Cross-border planning

Cross-border planning poses a challenge because spatial planning and territorial development are State competences. Today, it is rather an exception if the neighbouring country's territory is not blank on the maps of the national development plans. Equally, methodologies for cross-border planning are missing, and access to data on cross-border flows is not ensured. Nevertheless, long-term strategic cooperation necessitates the availability of a well-based spatial diagnosis and development visions reaching beyond the administrative borders, which is inseparable from access to data and clearly defined and tested planning methods. BorderLabs CE project aims to improve the conditions for integrated cross-border planning, which can reduce the separating effects of the state borders. The actors of the tri-border area of the Neisse-Nysa-

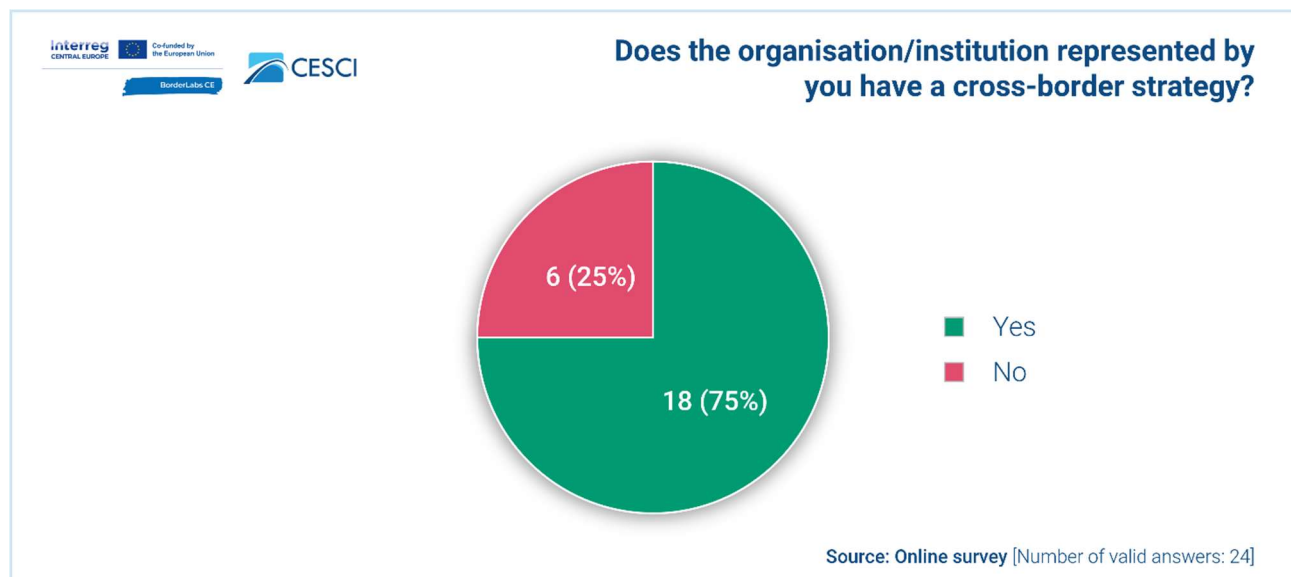


Nisa Euroregion aim to deliver the first integrated spatial strategy for the region. Concepts of cross-border slow-tourism (EGTC GO) and cross-border short supply chains (Ister-Granum EGTC) will also provide experiences to share. [The lessons to be learned from these initiatives will be incorporated into the information basis of the platform.](#)

Results of the survey

Taking the abovementioned difficulties into account, surprisingly, 75% of the respondents have a kind of cross-border strategy.

Figure 3 - Ownership of a cross-border strategy



Six respondents reported the existence of a cross-border **spatial** (urban or regional) **development plan**, seven structures have a **sectoral development plan**, and fifteen drafted a strategy on cooperation and **governance**. It means that integrated cross-border spatial plans are rarely available while the stakeholders are active in formulating the goals and means for the development of governance solutions.

Three structures have both sectoral and governance strategies; one of them has spatial and sectoral plans, and four own at least one strategic document targeting all three aspects. Sectoral development plans mostly target tourism and transport (4 each), education, energy, civil protection, and architecture (2). Further topics are: protection of the environment, economic development, health, sports, protection of natural and cultural heritage, development of SMEs, risk management, climate, minority languages, and project development. One respondent reported eight sectoral plans; another has four, and another two such documents.

The figures demonstrate that the most popular topics of cross-border cooperation are tourism and transport (including the development of cycle paths), where the cross-border structures have capacities and competences. The most advanced topics are those targeting urban development and architectural issues, where the national provisions set strict rules and confines.

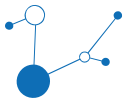
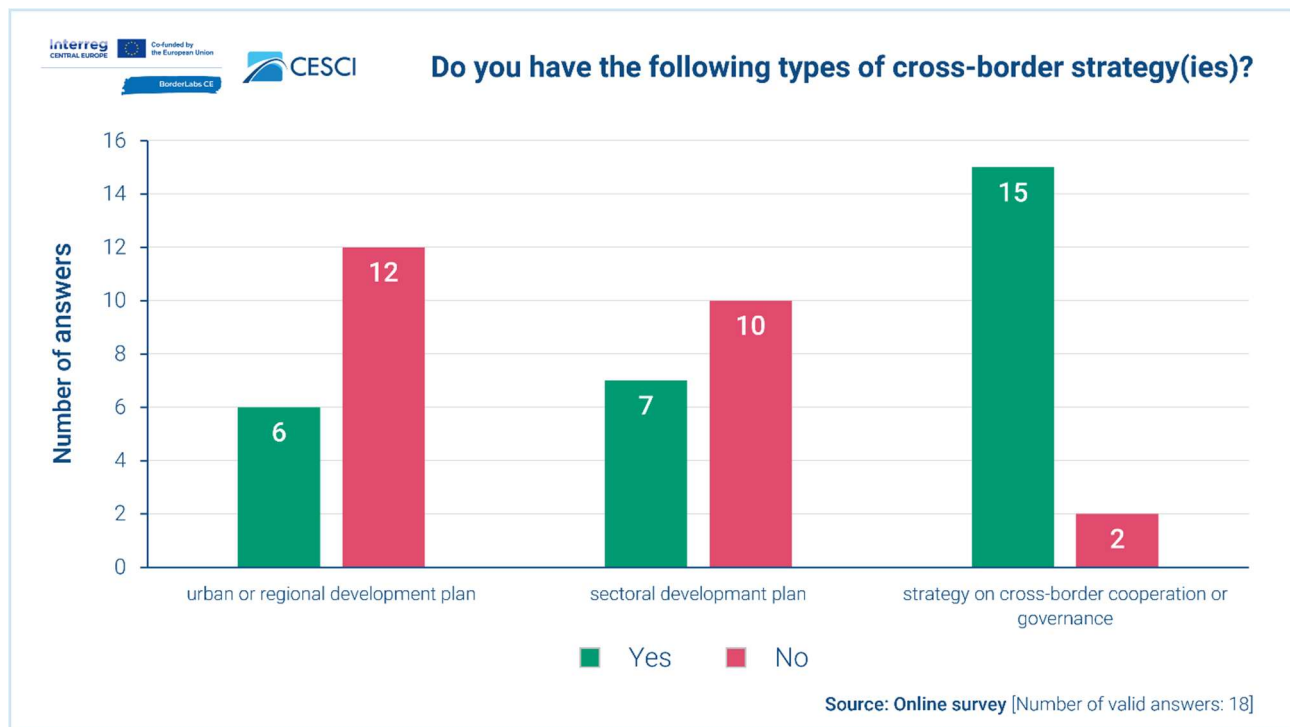


Figure 4 - Types of strategies



Those missing a strategic document mostly referred to the lack of capacities (3). One of them stipulated that they did not need it; another one reported that they were drafting their strategy at the time of the survey. The last respondent referred to the existence of visions instead of strategies. One of the largest EGTCs has not got strategies, but its Presidency adopts annual working plans which have a much action-oriented nature. Some Italian EGTCs are connected to the cross-border CLLDs along the Italian-Austrian border, which also have clear spatial development aspects.

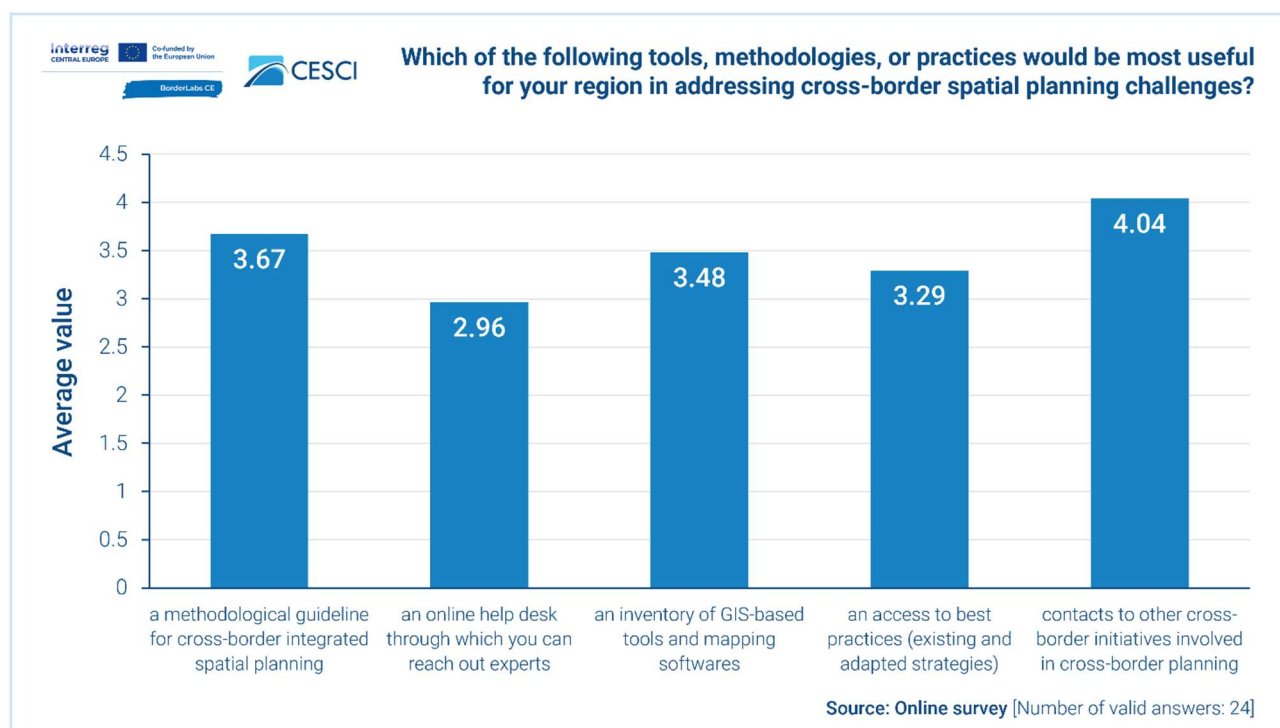
The respondents were invited to evaluate the usefulness of different tools to improve the conditions for cross-border planning through a scaling exercise, where 5 was the highest, and 1 the lowest score.

The results do not show a large variation, but it can be stipulated that the stakeholders are keen to get to know their counterparts in other border areas to exchange experiences. They also favour access to best practice methods to be adapted to their circumstances. At the same time, they do not find a permanent help desk useful or practical for planning practices.

Further proposals made by the respondents were to provide them with free consulting services in the fields of delivering maps and graphics, and information on relevant legal provisions, as well as access to (structured) data.



Figure 5 - Evaluation of learning tools facilitating cross-border planning



C. Cross-border participatory governance

Cross-border cooperation usually starts with interpersonal contacts, which are the basis for long-term mutual trust. In parallel with the gradual institutionalisation, cooperation bodies become more and more professional and they start working in an elitist, managerial manner, losing their contact with everyday citizens. The more sophisticated the governance structure, the less understandable and accessible for local citizens. Consequently, it is always challenging to create the frameworks for real citizens' engagement. BorderLabs CE project aims to facilitate the development of new methods and tools to enable more active participation in the design and management of cross-border spaces.

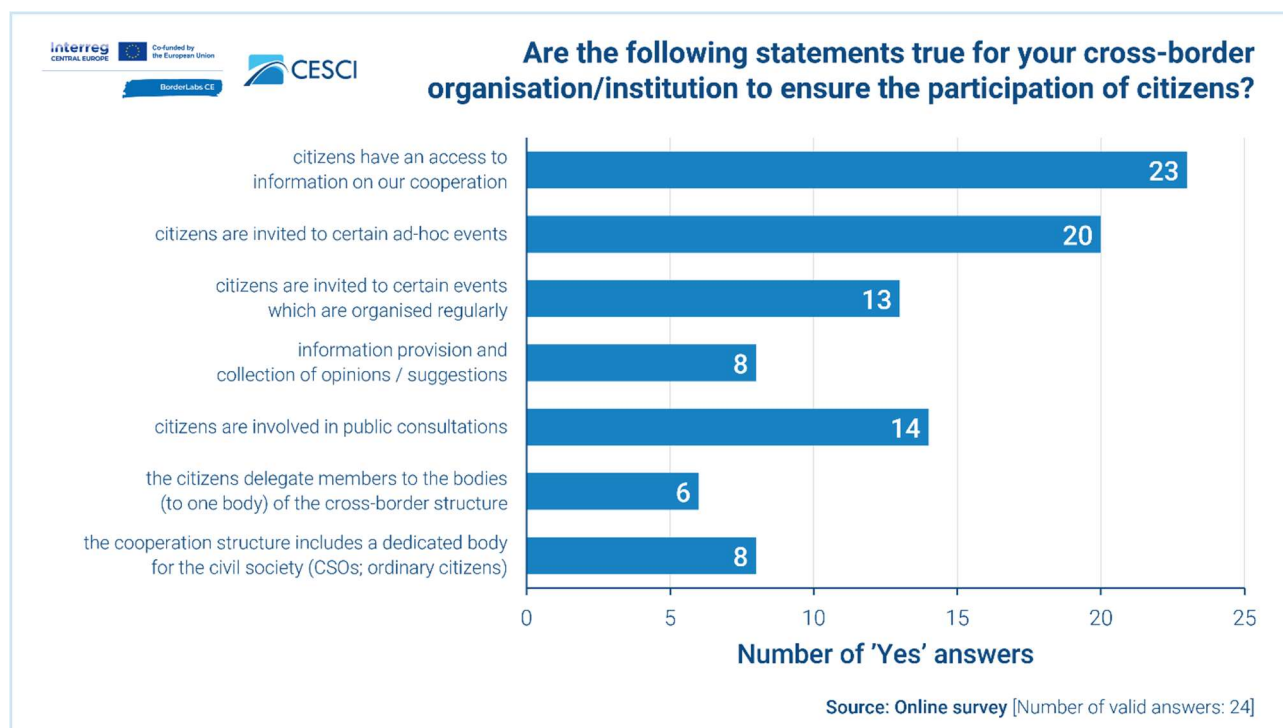
The Frankfurt-Słubice twin city is one of the most advanced cross-border structures within the programme area in participatory governance. They will transfer their knowledge to two other twin cities. [Participatory methods will also be used by every partner, whose experiences will also be included in the platform.](#)

Results of the survey

The challenge of citizens' engagement is easy to illustrate with the answers of the stakeholders: while almost every respondent ensures the regular access to information on the activities carried out by the cross-border structure, only eight (one third) reported the existence of a body dedicated to citizens' participation.



Figure 6 – Ways and instruments of citizens' engagement



When looking into the details, one can find that the picture is even more unfavourable, as five of the eight respondents did not identify the body through which the citizens can directly take part in the work of the cross-border structures. This gap might indicate that the answer was not fully grounded, and there is no such body that exists. Altogether three respondents referred to the existence of a dedicated body for citizens' engagement, namely the council (being the main decision-making body); the cooperation centre which has a coordinating role of joint activities; and the Citizens' Council (owing the right to make initiatives and recommendations towards the main decision-making body), subsequently. These are the most advanced examples of channelled participation where some representatives of the civil society take part in the preparation and the coordination of cross-border activities.

There are two further structures in which the citizens have indirect representation, and another respondent mentioned previously established working committees, which do not exist anymore. Civil society actors can participate in the realisation of cross-border projects upon the invitation of the cross-border structures in further cases. Tourism experts represent their subregion in a network-type EGTC from a professional point of view.

Nine respondents apply four tools and measures to involve citizens. These are mostly the information provision through the website and the social media sites, and the invitation of citizens to certain events. Four structures apply five, two respondents use six tools, and only one structure (a cross-border natural park) answered positively to all questions targeting the applied instruments.

The addressees were also asked about the difficulties they meet when trying to involve everyday citizens.

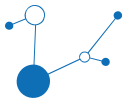
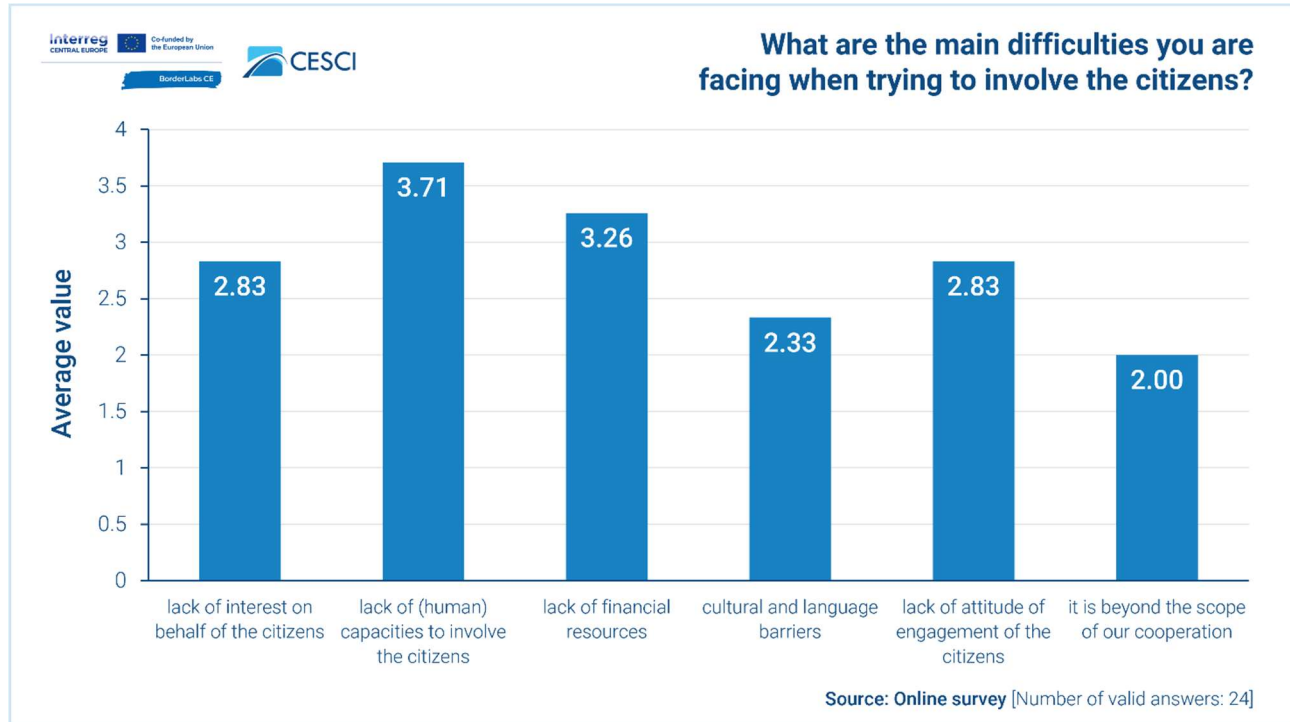


Figure 7 - Difficulties of citizens' engagement



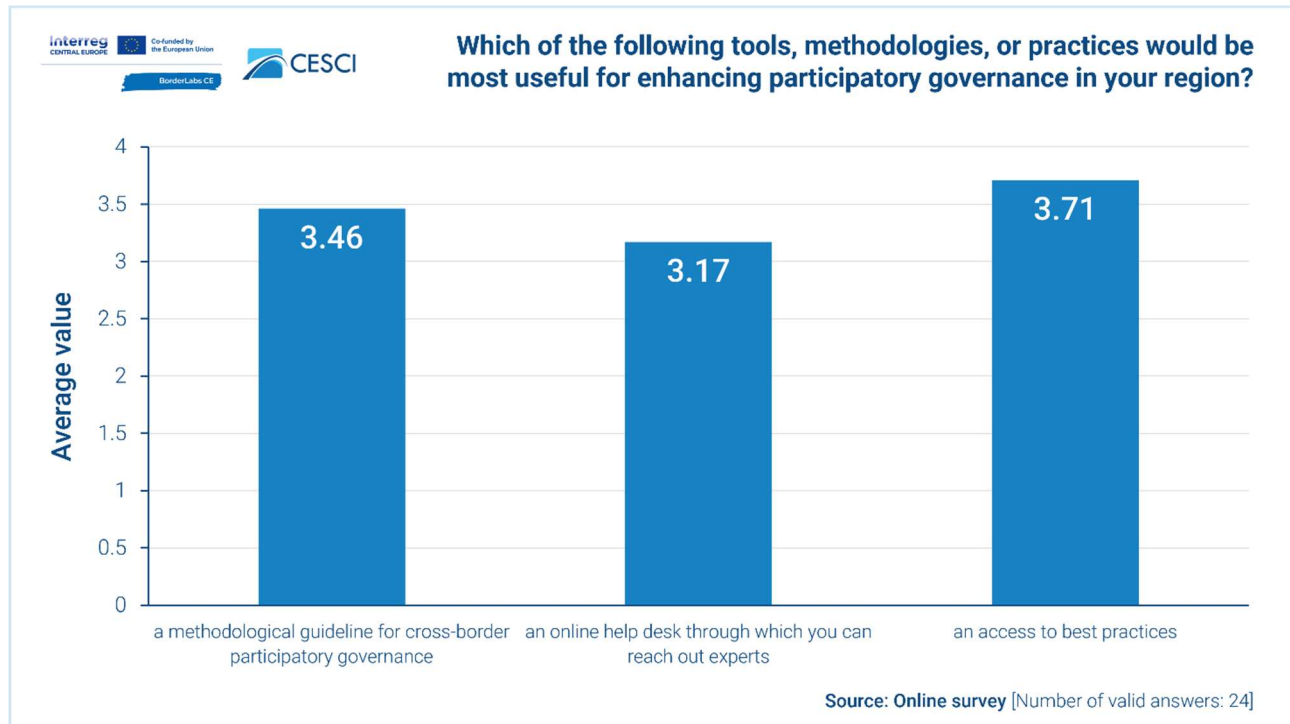
The most frequent barrier is the lack of human and financial capacities. As the structures need to struggle to ensure their financial sustainability and to realise large-scale professional activities, they cannot afford to concentrate on the involvement of the citizens. Another aspect ranked moderately high by the respondents is the lack of interest of the citizens in taking part in cross-border activities. One EGTC highlighted that they kept outreach the citizens through different means, but they were not interested in being part thereof. A good counter-example is the practice of Future Conferences of the Frankfurt/Stubice twin-city structure, involving the everyday citizens in the design of the joint future of the two border towns.

Interestingly, cultural and language barriers were ranked the lowest among the barriers, which justifies that if the citizens are keen to cooperate, they find ways of communication. This positive conclusion might be nuanced by one of the answers referring to the persisting prejudices.

Finally, concerning the adaptable tools, a compilation of best practices was scored with the highest value, followed by a methodological guide on cross-border participatory methods, while, similarly to the previous topic, the help-desk was the least popular option.



Figure 8 - Tools and methods to involve citizens



D. Elimination of cross-border legal obstacles

It is a general observation that the more intensive the cross-border mobility and integration, the more legal and administrative obstacles occur. This is the field of the three project topics, where the local and regional actors have the weakest competences: to change legal obstacles oftentimes necessitates the amendment of national provisions or the signing of bilateral intergovernmental treaties. However, the European Union offers more and more tools which can help the stakeholders reduce the barrier effects of the administrative borders, and there are good practices in Europe which can be adapted by them. BorderLabs CE project aims to collect and share good practices also in this field. It will not be the icebreaker, as the Institute of International Sociology of Gorizia (ISIG) has already developed a database on obstacles upon the request of the Council of Europe, and the b-solutions initiative managed by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) has also resulted in a rich compilation of obstacles and solutions. [It would be useless to develop a new database: instead, the platform will contain references to the existing resources, and provide a methodological guide for the management of legal obstacles, the BRIDGEforEU tool included.](#) Legal obstacles will be addressed by the spatial planning exercise of the tri-border euroregion, the development of the short supply chains within the Ister-Granum EGTC and the development of cross-border slow tourism facilities within the EGTC GO area. The government of Lower Austria concentrates its pilot action directly on cross-border legal obstacles.



Results of the survey

The addressees of the survey were requested to mention legal obstacles they face during their daily operation. The scope of the reported obstacles is quite large. Regardless of the principles of free movement of workers within the EU, in a cross-border context, hiring staff is still a challenge. There are differences between the labour codes, and the application of the A1 template is not properly adapted everywhere. Due to the domestic rules related to the EU projects, it is not limited to hiring project staff beyond the Austrian borders.

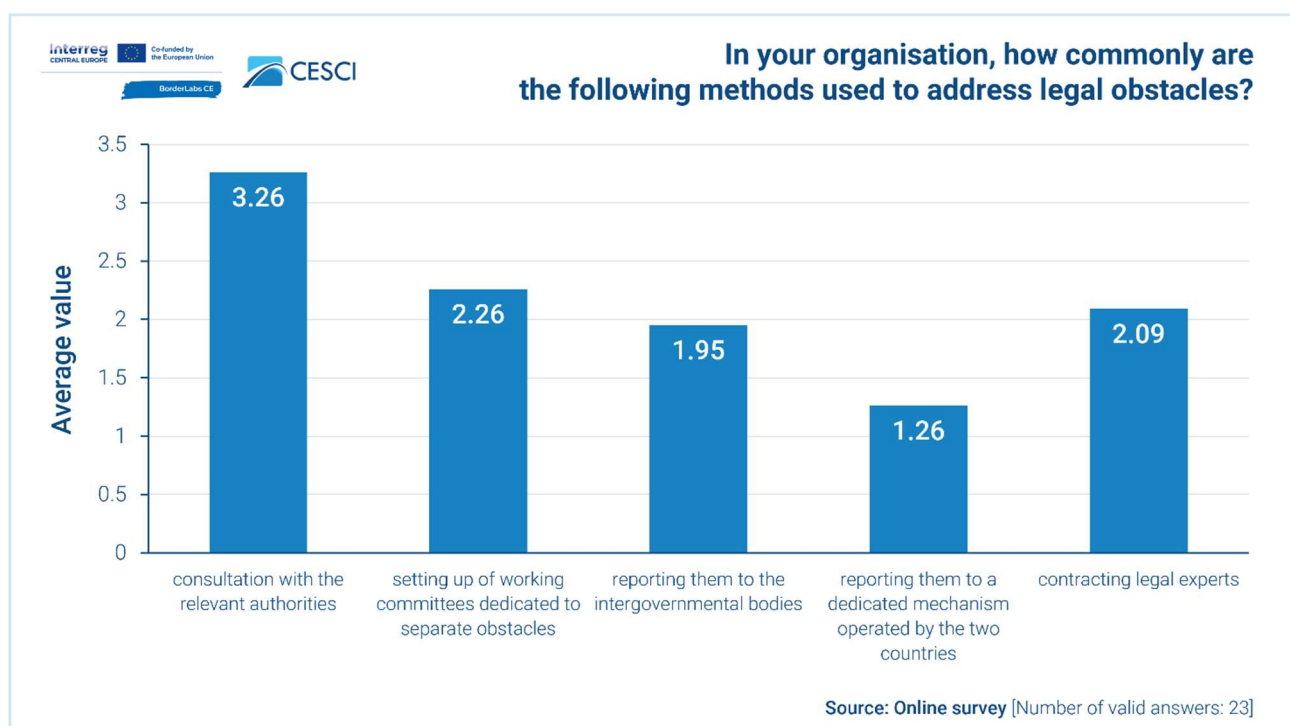
Cross-border structures face difficulties stemming from the different national accounting and VAT rules, and the differences between public procurement laws. The varied certificates necessary for applications also generate problems, as the models of authorisation.

To launch a cross-border bus line is hindered by many legal obstacles, and the domestic legislation oftentimes limits the cross-border mobility of the citizens (e.g. youth). One respondent referred to the difficulties related to the notification of transporting pupils abroad. Cross-border spatial planning is burdened by the different national rules; the visitors' codes of conduct prescribe different behaviour rules, leading to misunderstandings when visiting environmentally vulnerable areas.

In general terms, the barriers are generated by the different legislative background and the differences between the neighbouring countries' administrative systems: the competences are delegated to different levels and authorities. Furthermore, the *acquis communautaire* does not include every sector, resulting in discrepancies between the EU level and national provisions. As a relevant, but non-legislative aspect was also mentioned, i.e. the need to raise awareness among politicians of the everyday difficulties of border citizens.

EGTCs referred to another specific phenomenon as well: many times, the groupings are not considered as cross-border entities; they are tackled as domestic entities of the seat country.

Figure 9 - Way of communicating legal obstacles

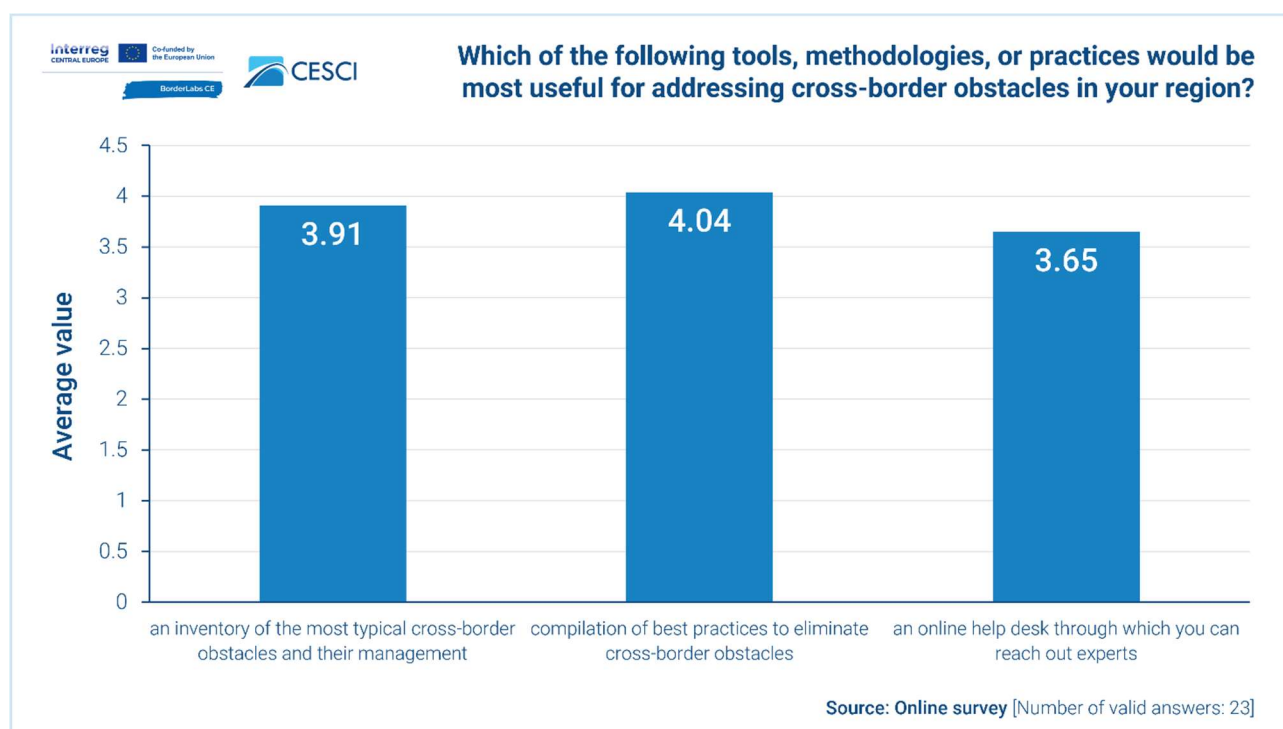




The survey covered the methods adapted to address the legal obstacles.

The most frequent solution is to report the obstacle to the relevant authority. The lack of dedicated bodies tackling cross-border obstacles can easily be justified by the low rate of relevant answers. The local and regional stakeholders often set up working committees focusing on the identified obstacle, which demonstrates their interest in cross-border integration. However, without the involvement of the relevant authorities, these barriers cannot be eliminated. Another solution is to contract legal experts who can analyse the situation and make recommendations, but the shortage of this option is again the lack of competence to resolve the problem.

Figure 10 - Tools and methods for eliminating cross-border obstacles



The three options of solutions obtained almost the same level of interest, with the leadership of a compilation of best practices of obstacle management. Here again, the help desk proved to be the least popular tool. At the same time, the respondents could use an inventory collecting the typical obstacles coupled with potential solutions. As similar information resources already exist, the present project should concentrate on the access to these resources.