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Building Social Capital in the Polish-German border region: An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of EU-funded Small Projects



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The front cover photo shows participants of one of the small projects

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Executive summary

Our research examines the development of 'social capital' in border regions. Specifically, we analyse whether participating in social or cultural events such as creative workshops or sporting competitions – so-called small projects – promotes neighbourly trust and the emergence of cross-border networks across one of the historically most difficult borders in Europe: in the Polish-German border region.

Social psychologists have long argued that under certain conditions contact between the members of different nations leads to improved relations between these nations. The small projects fund (SPF) is an EU-funded financial instrument to encourage municipalities or NGOs to organise events that permit personal encounters between Poles and Germans who live in the Euroregions across the Polish-German border. The goal is to help potentially prejudiced border region residents realise that their fears are unfounded, to develop a sense of trust in people from the other side, and to gradually develop cross-border networks.

However, there is so far no unambiguous empirical evidence that cross-border contact leads to greater trust in, or stronger networks with, the neighbours from the other side. Our research takes a qualitative, interview-based approach and examines this proposition, as well as the conditions under which social capital develops as a result of thorough personal contact. In the summer and autumn 2013, we observed 17 small projects with a variety of themes and conducted 90 interviews with 51 Polish and German participants. We interviewed most of these participants twice: once before they participated in the project and immediately afterwards, to trace how perceptions change as a result of personal contact. We also interviewed project organisers as well as a control group of 30 Poles and Germans to determine if the people who participate in small projects are in any way atypical. We found no major differences between our control group and the actual project participants, which indicates that small projects do not attract a completely atypical group of people.

The border region is a site of lively and regular exchanges, though these are often quite cursory, for example to go shopping. This lively exchange goes hand in hand with a sense of familiarity and no major prejudices. When asked how they would react if a neighbour of the other nationality moved into their street, or if one of their family members wished to marry a person from the other side, most people reacted positively. We encountered hardly any dislike and distrust of people from the other side. On the contrary, there is much affinity and readiness to trust. Most of our respondents described people from the other side in very positive terms, such as likeable, sociable, open or hospitable, though some negative attributes were also mentioned, including chaotic, sly or stiff.

Most participants became involved in the project through their membership in an organisation, such as a club or through voluntary organisations. For many youth projects, recruitment took place through schools or youth organisations.

Quite a few people had heard of the Euroregions and could define their activities in the border region. However, most of our respondents had either not heard of the Euroregions or were unable to define them.

In the context of small projects, communication between Poles and Germans is often hindered by the language barrier, though some basic communication is possible in English, through interpreters, or using body language. And indeed, we observed a range of contact situations in small projects. For example, several projects such as joint workshops offer many opportunities to interact, while certain solitary activities by nature make it harder for the Polish and German participants to mingle. In such circumstances, it is even more important to have a strong supporting programme on the side of the main activity of a project, such as concerts, parties or barbecues. In some projects there were many such surrounding activities, while in others there was no real programme to bring people together outside of the main project activity. We also witnessed some spontaneous and very cordial interactions, for example during unplanned evening activities or on the side of village fetes.

To be sure, sometimes contact gives rise to conflicts or misunderstandings. We observed one such conflict in a youth camp. However, all in all, Polish-German exchanges during projects tend to be very positive experiences. For the vast majority of our interviewees, no opinion change occurred because their perceptions were already very good to begin with. We observed change in only five cases. In two of them, this was a change for the worse that directly resulted from the conflict during the abovementioned youth camp. In the three remaining cases, a noticeable improvement took place in young participants' opinions as a result of their positive experiences during the project.

While a good deal of trust in the neighbours already exists in the Polish-German border region, there is still room for building new relations as well as deepening and developing the scope of existing cross-border networks. To this end, and based on the conclusions from this research, we recommend the following measures to perfect the small projects fund:

Recommendations for project organisers

- 1) A substantive theme for the project is desirable.
- 2) Allowing teenagers an input into the project content will help to engage them more.
- 3) Plan for 'surrounding activities'.
- 4) In youth projects, try to bring together Poles and Germans of comparable age and social background. If this is not possible, have motivated pedagogues ready to step in.
- 5) Seminars can have a more positive effect if they are embedded in a broader thematic framework.
- 6) Village fetes should be devised around a joint element and only receive SPF money for the joint element.

Recommendations for SPF managers

- 1) Simplify the application form and the application process.
- 2) Allow content; in fact, encourage content.

- 3) Include in the application form a section on 'surrounding activities' next to the main activity of the project.
- 4) Make the territory where SPF money can be spent more flexible.
- 5) Speed up the accounting and reimbursement process. Consider advance payments from national or regional budgets.
- 6) Send Euroregional representatives to observe more projects.
- 7) Consider letting good projects be repeated without reducing the co-financing rate.

1 Introduction

Borders are sometimes described as 'scars of history'. The lines on the ground that separate one state from another are often the result of historical conflict. Even when two states have excellent relations, barriers to trade, immigration rules, border formalities, or lacking infrastructure can sometimes make crossing the border very difficult for the people who live on either side of it.

In the European Union, border formalities have largely disappeared, spawning visions of a 'borderless Europe'.¹ Euroregions – associations of border municipalities that cooperate across national borders² – have proliferated in the 1990s. Nevertheless, in many cases, historical obstacles to good relations still remain. Other barriers such as different languages or different cultures also coincide with borders.

In a 'borderless Europe', this must be cause for concern in its own right, but other problems specifically for the regions adjacent to national borders also result from less than cordial citizen relations. Due to their geographical and political peripherality, border regions are sometimes not very highly developed economically, though there are of course important exceptions.³ For a successful cross-border environment, which is characterised by inter-firm networks, effective cross-border cooperation between local authorities, and citizens' willingness to use shared facilities, there is a need for a certain level of trust and cross-border networks.⁴

This raises the concept of 'social capital', in other words a combination of trust between the people living in the border region and cooperative networks across the border.⁵ As the word 'capital' indicates, social capital is seen as a valuable property which facilitates social, political and economic life. In European border regions an attempt to stimulate social capital has long been underway.⁶ This is done in small-scale cultural or social events such as workshops or sporting competitions. These are

¹ Anderson, M., den Boer, M., Cullen, P., Gilmore, W., Raab, C. and Walker, N. (1995) *Policing the European Union: Theory, law and practice*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Cappellin, R. and Batey, P.W.J., eds. (1993) *Regional Networks, Border Regions and European Integration* (European Research in Regional Science Vol. 3), London: Pion.

² See, for example Perkmann, M. (2002) 'Euroregions: Institutional Entrepreneurship in the European Union', in Perkmann, M. and Sum, N. (eds.) *Globalization, regionalization, and cross-border regions*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 103-124.

³ Krämer, R. (2002) *Aktiv in Europa: Die ostdeutschen Länder in der Europäischen Union. Eine vorläufige Bilanz*, Potsdam: Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung.

⁴ Guz-Vetter, M. (2002) *Polsko-niemieckie pogranicze: Szanse i zagrożenia w perspektywie przystąpienia Polski do Unii Europejskiej*, Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych; Knippschild, R. (2008) *Grenzüberschreitende Kooperation: Gestaltung und Management von Kooperationsprozessen in der Raumentwicklung im deutsch-polnisch-tschechischen Grenzraum*, Dresden: Leibniz-Institut für ökologische Raumentwicklung; Krätke, S. (2002) 'Cross-border cooperation and regional development in the German–Polish border area', in Perkmann M. and Sum N.-L. (eds.) *Globalization, Regionalization and Cross-Border Regions*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 125–147.

⁵ Putnam, R.D. (1995) 'Bowling alone: America's declining social capital', *Journal of Democracy* 6(1), pp. 65-78.

⁶ Mirwaldt, K. (2012) 'The Small Projects Fund and Social Capital Formation in the Polish–German Border Region: An Initial Appraisal', *Regional Studies* 46(2), pp. 259-272.

co-funded by the European Union through so-called 'small projects funds' (SPFs). The aim is for people from the border region who are prejudiced or who do not want anything to do with people from the other side, to experience a structured encounter with people from the other side. This leads to communication, which may result in an epiphany, when people realise that their fears were unfounded and that people from other side are more agreeable than they had initially feared. As a sense of trust develops, more interactions follow. In this fashion, over time more and more people develop their own cross-border networks.

However, there is so far no unambiguous empirical evidence that cross-border contact leads to improved perceptions or stronger networks with the neighbours from the other side. And even if this is the case, under what conditions are such exchanges successful? Are some people more likely than others to undergo opinion change or consolidate cross-border networks? Does this depend on the type of project (cultural, vocational, sport...), the duration of the project or the actual events that take place during a project, and on which the organisers have some influence?

Our research, for the first time, examines the effectiveness of small projects in promoting trust and the development of cross-border networks between the residents of European border regions. The research involved collecting new empirical data on neighbourly perceptions in a border region that has historically been one of the most conflictual in the EU: the Polish-German border region. This border is the product of centuries of territorial aggression and forced mass migration. During the Cold War, the border was closed to cross-border citizen exchanges for long stretches of time. More recently, fears of territorial claims from Germans unsettled many on the Polish side, while many Germans also had misgivings about closer relations with the Polish neighbours. As an extreme example, on the day that the visa-free travel agreement between Poland and Germany came into force, the first buses that arrived in Frankfurt/Oder from the Polish side were received by stone-throwing neo-Nazis.⁷

With the border being opened for visa-free travel in 1991 and with border checks being abolished altogether in 2007, opportunities for interaction proliferated. However, with a continuing lack of well-developed cross-border networks, an attempt to actively promote citizen exchanges in small projects was initiated in 1995. The next section of this report describes these efforts in more detail, while section 3 describes our research design to evaluate the small projects fund in the Polish-German border region. Section 4 outlines our findings, before we conclude with a range of policy recommendations.

⁷ Rada, U. (2004) *Zwischenland: Europäische Geschichten aus dem deutsch-polnischen Grenzgebiet*, Berlin: be.bra verlag.

2 The Small Projects Fund in the Polish-German Border Region

Funding for small-scale cross-border events is available through the EU co-financed cross-border co-operation programmes that are part of European Union cohesion policy under the European Territorial Co-operation objective (before 2007 this was the INTERREG Community Initiative). Cross-border co-operation programmes, both at the internal and external borders of the EU have the option of setting up a small projects fund for 'people-to-people' projects such as social, cultural or sporting events, youth camps, meetings between clubs or village fetes, etc. The broad guidelines are set by the European Union, but programme authorities can decide on the specifics such as the amount of money set aside for small projects or the maximum eligible costs of each project. However, all projects must abide by the principles that govern EU cohesion policy, including the principle of additionality, which stipulates that EU Structural Funds must not replace national or sub-national funds but rather must only be used for activities that would not otherwise take place.

In the 2007-2013 period there were three cross-border co-operation programmes in the Polish-German border region: the northernmost Mecklenburg-Vorpommern/Brandenburg-Zachodniopomorskie programme, the Voivodship Lubuskie-Brandenburg programme, and the southernmost Sachsen-Polska programme (see Map 1). Small projects funds are parts of these programmes, but are managed more locally by Euroregional offices. This shows quite clearly the grassroots orientation of small project funds.

Four Euroregions span the Polish-German border (see Map 1): Pomerania (which also includes some Swedish municipalities); Pro Europa Viadrina; Spree-Neisse-Bober/Spree-Nisa-Nysa-Bóbr (SNB) and Neisse-Nisa-Nysa (which also includes municipalities in the Czech Republic). Secretariats of these Euroregions manage small project funds set aside for their areas in the framework of one of the three cross-border programmes identified above. In principle financial resources are assigned to each Euroregion's area. For the sake of flexibility, 20% of the programme funds could be spent outside the Euroregional territory. However, most Polish-German Euroregions use this exception only in cases where one of the project partners is based in the eligible area and another is not.

Small projects are dedicated to the specific purpose of bringing people from both sides together in a meaningful setting in the areas of culture and sport, tourism or youth exchanges. The aim is for people who live in the border region to get to know people from the other side, to start trusting each other and thus to build cross-border networks and improve neighbourly relations. As Euroregion Pro Europa Viadrina puts it, 'Bringing people together directly, eliminating prejudices and meaningfully connecting initiatives on both sides of the Oder is the goal of this fund.'⁸ With its aim of bringing people closer together and promoting networking, social capital is exactly what the fund seeks to promote. Some projects combine this with a social dimension, e.g. in involving underprivileged children.

⁸ Euroregion Pro Europa Viadrina (n.d.) 'Von Mensch zu Mensch – Europäische Geschichte und Geschichten', <http://www.euroregion-viadrina.de/cms/front_content.php?idart=20&idcat=13&lang=1> (accessed 23 October 2013).

Map 1: Cross-border co-operation programmes 2007-2013 and Euroregions at the Polish-German border



SFP beneficiaries can be non-profit organisations based in the border area. The most frequent type of beneficiaries are municipalities, NGOs, clubs, schools, etc. In essence small projects need to involve at least two organisations from both sides of the border, with one organisation playing the role of a leader, and the other acting as a project partner. Eligible total costs for a project vary between 17.647 Euros (*voivodship* Lubuskie-Brandenburg programme) and 25.000 Euros (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern/Brandenburg-Zachodniopomorskie programme). Generally, two pots of money exist (one on the Polish side and one on the German) that are administered by each secretariat, though project selection tends to take place in joint Euroregional steering committees.

The distinctive characteristic of the SPF is that application, implementation and reporting is simpler than for larger, more expensive projects. Despite this, the SPF is hardly seen as easy money. There are three reasons behind this. The first is the pre-financing requirement. Beneficiaries need to have enough money to pay for the project, as they are only reimbursed after the end of the project and after financial control has taken place. The second is the co-financing requirement. The maximum funding rate is 85% but if projects are repeated, a degressive subsidy rate is applied in Euroregions Pro Europa Viadrina and SNB, where the funding rate decreases from 85% to 75% for the first repetition, to 65% for the second repetition and to 50% for all subsequent repetitions. Euroregion Pomerania has a more flexible arrangement that

does not automatically lead to a lower funding rate, although repeat projects do not always receive 85%. The Euroregion has some discretion over this decision. And finally, the third reason is the long time needed for reimbursement. Very frequently beneficiaries have to wait for the reimbursement of project costs for several months, and not infrequently more than one year after project completion. However, this varies between different Euroregions; for example, on the German side of Euroregion Pomerania the process is much shorter than elsewhere. All these rules could create obstacles for some beneficiaries, especially clubs that do not usually have many other sources of funding for their activities.

3 Research methods

Our research tests the well-known but so far unsubstantiated claim that cross-border contact can bring about 'social capital', i.e. a sense of trust in people from the other side of the border and cross-border networks. Social psychologists have long argued that under certain conditions contact between the members of different nations leads to improved perceptions between these nations. The conditions that apply to structured encounters as in small projects include the following:

- Contact must not be superficial but rather thorough and personal.
- Contact must be pleasant rather than fraught with conflict.
- The participants should share similar goals, rather than being in competition, as this can give rise to antagonism.
- The participants from both sides should have a comparable social status. It is less helpful if people from one side come from a socially deprived background, while people from the other side are affluent.⁹

The deeper insights of this theory have so far been neglected in the design and evaluation of small projects. The research that generated these conditions was conducted largely on children. Some of these, such as the requirement that the participants should not be in competition, can probably be relaxed for adults. For example, as we indicate below, some sporting competitions may lead to rivalry but not necessarily to animosity. The requirement that contact should be thorough and pleasant – and not superficial or disagreeable – is much more important, as we also indicate below.

Our research traces changes in neighbourly perceptions by investigating a number of small projects. In the summer and autumn of 2013, we observed 17 such projects and conducted interviews with the participants. Projects took place in Euroregions Pro Europa Viadrina, SNB and Pomerania, and we sought to cover a broad spectrum of thematic priorities. Table 1 presents a list of the projects we observed, grouped together by theme.

Table 1: Type and number of projects observed

Type	Number of projects
Youth	4
Sport	3
Culture, history, academic	4
Vocational	4
Village fete	2

Youth projects are a particularly common type of project, as there are many attempts to get young people to develop good relations with the neighbours from a young age. At the same time, there are also several overlaps with other types of projects, in particular sport. Thus, three of the youth projects that we observed also had a sporting topic, including breakdance, running and horseriding. In our analysis, we classify all

⁹ Allport, G.W. (1979) *The Nature of Prejudice* (25th Anniversary ed.), Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

those that seemed largely about the sport itself (e.g. a one-day running competition) into the sport category, while any youth-sport projects that involved an element of living together for a few days, were classified as youth projects. Cultural, historical or academic projects included academic seminars and projects devoted to historical or cultural topics. As before, there were overlaps between these cultural projects and those that were at least partially concerned with the participants' professional development (here called vocational projects). For example, there was a 'plein-air' for painters and a competition in historical cooking that both involved some artistic or creative elements, but since they were largely about the participants' professions, we classified them as vocational projects. Finally, we also observed two village fetes, to which members of the partner municipality were invited and which therefore counted as Polish-German projects.

Aside from observing the grounds and projects wherever possible, we also conducted pairs of semi-structured interviews with selected project participants of most of them.¹⁰ Thus interviews with the same individuals were conducted first before and then again after they participated in a small project. We wanted to find out how frequently border region residents interact with people from the other side of the border, how they perceived these people before the project, how they experienced the project, and whether participation had any influence on their perceptions of people on the other side. Thus, interviews covered several open-ended questions:

1) Before the small project: how long interviewees have been living in the region; how often they cross the border and to what end; general stance on strangers and foreigners; previous contact with the neighbours; perceptions and opinions of them; trust and affinity; whether they have heard of the Euroregion; how they came to participate in the small project; previous participation in small projects.

2) After the project: how interviewees would describe the experience; how it corresponded with their expectations; aspects they enjoyed and disliked; description of a contact situation; perceptions and opinions of the other participants; perceptions and opinions of the neighbours generally; trust and affinity; if changed, nature and degree of change; future plans to cross the border or participate in small projects.

Not least in order to avoid some well-known problems connected with social desirability,¹¹ interviews were conducted by native speakers of Polish and German. Wherever the interviewees granted their informed consent, interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Most people we approached were happy to be interviewed and readily granted their consent. In cases where they did not, or where an

¹⁰ In two projects we visited, the guests from the other side cancelled or did not show up. In one other case, the organisers whisked us off so that we did not have a chance to meet any of the participants. In one more case, the participants were too young to be able to grant their informed consent, so that interviewing them would have violated ethical research standards.

¹¹ Next to many other strategies, among which were the following: assuring respondents that we would use what they said only in anonymised form, trying to build rapport by echoing the words they used, or introducing questions with the phrase 'Sometimes people tell me in interviews...' etc. Cf. Nederhof, A.J. (1985) 'Methods of Coping with Social Desirability Bias: A Review', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 15(3), pp. 263-280.

interviewee was not yet sixteen (we also interviewed some 14- and 15-year olds), we took extensive notes instead. Interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes.

In total, we conducted pairs of interviews with 19 German and 20 Polish participants of small projects. In some cases, we were not able to conduct two interviews because our interviewees 'escaped' shortly after the completion of the project and were not available for the second interview. In one case, we merely caught a glimpse of a much longer-term project (a so-called network project, i.e. a much longer version of small projects) and since we were only able to interview the participants right at the halfway point, we chose to carry out only one interview. To establish a baseline among the cross-border project participants, a suitable control group of 15 Poles and 15 Germans who did not participate in any projects was also interviewed about their background and perceptions of the neighbours. As part of our research, we also interviewed 39 project organisers in the three Euroregions – Pomerania, Pro Europa Viadrina and SNB – as well as seven Euroregional or programme staff.¹² This gave us a general idea of how they value the fund but also where particular problems lie. For an overview of our interviews, see Table 2 below:

Table 2: Number of interviews and respondents*

	Germans	Poles	Total
Project participants: pairs of interviews	19 (38)	20 (40)	39 (78)
Project participants: only one interview	7	5	12
Control interviews	15	15	30
Project organisers	26 (27)	13	39 (40)
Euroregional and programme staff	6 (7)	1	7 (8)
Total	73 (94)	54 (74)	127 (168)

* Figures in brackets refer to number of interviews, while the other figures refer to number of respondents.

In our choice of whom we approached for an interview, we were guided by the need to cover a wide range of demographic features such as people's age, sex or education, though all interviewees were residents of the border region. Frequently we were limited by attendance. For example, sometimes half an hour before the project start only one or two participants were already present, in which case we tended to ask them rather than wait for others to arrive and risk delaying the project start. In other cases, we were given the chance to speak to some participants on the night before, or the opportunity to travel with the German or Polish group to the other side and to conduct interviews on the bus ride.

With this sampling strategy and the relatively small number of interviewees, a few words of caution about generalisability are in order. It is highly unlikely that the opinions we came across are untypical for people who live in the borderlands, In fact, it is far more likely that these opinions are fairly typical. However, in general, qualitative research does not seek to make statements about the prevalence of certain attitudes but rather to paint a picture of the range of attitudes out there. For this reason, we never mention any percentages in this report, and we would urge our readers not to attempt calculating any either.

¹² To safeguard our respondents' anonymity, we reference these by number, indicating in each whether it was a German or a Polish respondent.

4 Findings

4.1 Interviews with organisers

Municipalities are particularly common project organisers.¹³ As a general rule, most projects are either organised between two partner municipalities or are embedded in a broader town partnership through town twinning, i.e. are carried out by entities linked to the cooperating municipalities such as schools, culture centres, sport clubs etc. Thus, 12 out of the 17 projects we visited were organised by municipalities, their subsidiaries or NGOs in towns that cooperate in the framework of the twinning agreement. Some partnerships have their roots in the pre-1989 period, while others are very recent or embryonic. In some cases, local pioneers such as the directors of tourist or cultural institutions or the fire brigades instigated the town partnership from the bottom-up.

Cooperation within partnerships takes different shapes. Some of these partnerships are very well organised, having detailed annual cooperation plans, whilst others take place in an *ad hoc* fashion, from project to project. Regardless, many of these town partnerships promote a lively exchange in many different areas including youth projects, cultural events or joint village fetes, to name but a few. These events are often funded through the SPF and usually alternate between the Polish and the German side. Only in three projects that we observed was just the one side actively involved in applying for SPF funds. In some of these cases, there was a sense that the partners were not as reliable as they should be. For example, in one case, certain approved projects did not take place because the partners changed their mind: 'a project was supposed to take place this year, but a month before the German partner informed us that they're not coming (because they have no guardians, because they started to come up with various excuses). The project did not take place.' (Organiser interview PL6). Usually, embedding SPF projects in a partnership permits creating personal networks and trusting relationships among the administrations, but this always depends on the individuals involved. Some mayors, for example, may not care as much about Polish-German exchanges as their counterparts. Moreover, changes in local government can lead to atrophy or – just the opposite – to a revival of cross-border activities.

In several cases, problems resulted from the fact that partner towns were located in different Euroregions. Some difficulties arose from the comparatively small size of the German side of Euroregion SNB and in the area where Euroregions Pomerania and Pro Europa Viadrina meet. It is not impossible to carry out projects across the borders of a Euroregion but it tends to be far more difficult, which can cause much frustration. As one project organiser put it: 'We are supposed to grow together, and the EU decides who our friends can be!' (Organiser interview DE2).

In general, everyone was very much in favour of the SPF. Several project organisers – both from towns and from small clubs – argued that, without this support, it would be

¹³ This observation is also confirmed by a vast number of quantitative studies, e.g.: Raczyk, A., Dołzbłasz, S. and Leśniak-Johann, M. (2012) *Relacje współpracy i konkurencji na pograniczu Polsko-Niemieckim*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Gaskor; Szmigiel-Rawska, K. and Dołzbłasz, S. (2012) *Trwałość współpracy przygranicznej*, Warszawa: CeDeWu.

impossible to organise any Polish-German events. Much enthusiasm is also demonstrated by the large number of people who contribute without a salary (cooks, people who provide premises, interpreters etc.).

There were mixed perceptions of the application process. Some project organisers found the application form very difficult to handle because they thought it was difficult to guess which piece of information goes where, what costs are eligible or what the evaluators want to see. Filling in the application form was sometimes deemed to involve too much work. As one organiser put it: 'The forms used to be simple but now they are becoming more and more complicated.' (Organiser interview PL13).

At the same time, a majority of project organisers praised the Euroregional staff for their advice on project applications. However it should be underlined that this advice primarily concerns technical issues (cost eligibility, applications etc.). Euroregion offices do not to meddle with the substantive content of projects, though they will discourage applicants whose projects are not good enough. At present, competition for SPF funds appears to be very low. Nearly all project organisers we interviewed stated that their projects are always accepted and never rejected, if they are formally correct. This is partly a result of the limited number of applicants (see below), which limits the choice for Euroregional steering committees, but also due to the quality of the advice that promising applicants are given. A potential source of bias arises from the fact that many of the municipalities that apply for funds are paying members of the Euroregions, and the representatives may sometimes be reluctant to reject their members' projects.

The thematic content of projects is often defined bottom-up by people who work closely with their municipal administrations. In terms of the conditions under which social capital formation can be expected, a common theme is necessary for people to bond over, and many of these projects achieve this. Common hobbies, professional interests or historical themes that interest the participants offer excellent topics for discussion. In most youth projects we observed, there was also a common theme, though in some cases this theme was defined by the adult organisers, which the young participants tended to find boring. In another case, the idea for a theme arose from conversations with teenagers: 'We asked young people what kind of project they would like to take part in (for it to be effective and to avoid wasting funds).' (Organiser interview PL9). This approach was highly successful in getting teenagers interested. Village fetes were not equally successful in uniting participants over a common theme: one fete we visited did have such a theme, while the second did not.

Several projects were repeat events where a project was carried out for a second or third time, which brought into play the reduced subsidy rate for repeat projects, notably in Euroregions Pro Europa Viadrina and SNB. In some cases organisers found imaginative ways around this, e.g. by thinking of a different theme for essentially the same project idea or by involving new project partners that could apply for a 'new' project. However, where this was not the case, the degressive subsidy rate applied. Several people saw this as a problem. Most but not all organisers from towns and clubs argued that they could manage to contribute 15% but that a higher contribution would be impossible for them to raise. Many thought this was problematic because some projects are based on an excellent idea, and it is a pity to drop these and let the

established contacts dissipate. One organiser admitted that 'The lower co-funding in further editions of events is not perceived as a problem. We think [organising these events] is the municipality's responsibility, so we gladly provide funding ourselves.' (Organiser interview PL12). This raises the potential problem that the funding may not always be used according to the principle of additionality, but rather to replace existing commitments (see below).

The pre-financing requirement in particular causes many problems for project organisers. Many organisers, above all small clubs, cannot afford to advance thousands of Euros. Moreover, always depending on the Euroregion, it can take a very long time to get reimbursed, sometimes two years or more. Nearly all organisers mentioned this as a huge problem. Many also see it as too risky to pre-finance an entire project. For example, if a storm makes an outdoor event impossible, the project organisers have to pay the full cost. If fewer people than anticipated show up, say because of illness, the project organisers must pay the difference.

The established rates are sometimes seen as insufficient for maintaining a building or paying for food. One German mayor felt embarrassed because his Polish partners always serve up a huge buffet, whereas the German hosts have to scrimp because the daily rate of 15 Euros per person is not actually enough to cater for a guest for the full day (Organiser interview DE17).¹⁴ Some items, such as amateur bands that merely ask for a fee to cover their travel costs, or certain print materials, are not funded.

As in many EU-funded projects, the accounting and financial details are very complex, though municipalities often find this easier to handle than do small clubs. One example involved having to calculate the amount of fuel a lawnmower would consume per square metre of grass. Organisers generally accept that public funds must be accounted for properly, but – as in one extreme case – having to budget for plasters rather than having access to a small emergency budget can undermine the advantages of a fund that is supposed to be non-bureaucratic and easy to implement.

One project organiser called the pre-financing requirement and accounting process an 'anti-project measure' (Organiser interview DE14). Indeed, as a result of this requirement, many potential project organisers have decided against conducting a project. This was mentioned with regret by several of our interviewees. For example, 'The number of applicants from the German ... from the German side has decreased a lot. There are very few projects.' (Organiser interview DE7).¹⁵ As another example, 'the lack of advance payments makes the funds less available to clubs. The lack of advance payments and the long wait for reimbursement significantly limits the number of potential beneficiaries.' (Organiser interview PL12).

Thus, many organisers mentioned that the pre-financing requirement and the long reimbursement process were discouraging small clubs and NGOs from applying for funding: 'There should be advance payments. Without advance payments smaller organisations, including NGOs, have very limited opportunities in applying for

¹⁴ This day rate is for Euroregions Pro Europa Viadrina und SNB. In Euroregion Pomerania it amounts to 16 Euros.

¹⁵ Please note that this is the estimation of one project organiser. Specific numbers regarding trends in the number of applications are collected only in the Euroregions themselves.

funding.' (Organiser interview PL13). Because of their limited resources, NGOs often cannot afford to apply for SPF funding, even if they may have excellent ideas. As a consequence, the pool of applicants and projects that Euroregional steering committees can choose from is more limited than it might be, meaning that there is less healthy competition.

The possibility that some projects would perhaps have been funded from other sources if they had not been able to secure SPF funds can sometimes create problems. This would violate the principle of additionality. One comment from an organiser suggested that other funds would be available for Polish-German exchanges (e.g. from the municipality, from the Marshal's Office or from the Fundusz Inicjatyw Obywatelskich). However, the same organiser also claimed that SPF money was strictly used in addition to other activities: 'Currently one third of the centre's activities are Polish-German projects. But this, however, is just an addition, because the centre would still exist without them. A lack of funds from the Euroregion would not limit its activities.' (Organiser interview PL6).

Several organisers had the unfavourable impression that the fund creates, rather than satisfies, a demand. For example, one organiser (who had access to his municipality's own resources) criticised his Polish partners for submitting too many funding applications: 'That bothers me, the aftertaste with the funding. They do it for other reasons than out of conviction.' (Organiser interview DE16). Another criticised other applicants for submitting applications that are not really about organising a joint event but rather about getting some money. Yet another suggested that the Polish-German element is sometimes added as an afterthought: 'We are interested not only in Polish-German integration, but also in the participation of all generations, particularly in order to convince children to [participate in the activity].' (Organiser interview PL11). However, these negative perceptions were more than offset by the large number of organisers who consider the SPF an invaluable source of support for their Polish-German activities.

4.2 Border region residents' life in the border region and initial opinions

This section paints a picture of the behaviour of people in the Polish-German borderlands and describes the perceptions of the respective neighbours, in terms of their characteristics, affinity, and trust. One thing that should be noted is that border behaviour and initial opinions were very similar between the control group and the actual project participants. For project organisers and policy-makers, this should be reassuring because it shows that small projects do not attract a completely atypical group of people. In other words, our research indicates that nearly everybody in the border region would be a potential participant in a small project and would be open to the kind of integrative processes we describe below. At the same time people are more likely to participate if they are members of a club or otherwise linked with an organisation that organises small projects. To reach as many people as possible, it is therefore necessary to encourage as many of these organisations as possible to apply for SPF funds.

First of all, it is important to note that the border region is a site of lively and regular exchanges. Many of our interviewees go to the other side quite regularly. Germans

tend to go to buy goods that are cheaper on the Polish side such as cigarettes, fuel or vegetables and clothes. However, where in Germany people live is very important in determining how frequently they go to Poland. Thus, people from border towns such as Forst or Frankfurt/Oder and their surroundings tend to go several times a month. Conversely, people from further afield such as Cottbus, Greifswald or closer to Berlin tend to go much less frequently, and not specifically to go shopping. For example, 'When I drive there, and there are chanterelle mushrooms, then I'll also buy chanterelles, but I don't expressly drive there to buy something.' (Sigrid,¹⁶ woman in her 70s).

Conversely, shopping trips from the Polish to the German side are rarer and concern specialist articles such as artists' materials or dog food. Several interviewees mentioned that shopping trips to the German side had been more common shortly after the border had been opened but that this had changed because certain goods were now more easily available on the Polish side than before:

A long time ago, when in Poland there were no such, let's say, attractive products on the shelves that the German colleagues had. Back then people would go, for example, I don't know, yes, exactly, to buy some sweets, some clothes. People used to go there. (Marcin, man in his 30s)

As far as trips and holidays are concerned, most German interviewees had already done this or were contemplating it, for example to go to the Baltic Sea or visit a concentration camp for educational purposes. Likewise, many Poles had been on a trip to Germany to visit museums, amusement parks or certain sights in German cities. However, several Poles and Germans were not interested in such a trip or holiday.

A few participants mentioned having some kind of professional connection, e.g. having done some work on the other side, having Polish or German colleagues, or having professional networks that extend to both sides of the border. Several Poles and Germans – particularly of the younger generation – mentioned that they would be willing in principle to work on the other side, but remuneration and language skills would be important considerations. A good share of the participants had friends or acquaintances on the other side.

This lively exchange seems to go hand in hand with a sense of familiarity. When asked how they would react if a neighbour of the other nationality moved into their street, none of our respondents expressed any reservations. On the contrary, most of them said they would be happy about this and would seek contact with this neighbour. Others mentioned that they already had a neighbour from the respective other country and had experienced no problems.

When asked how they would react if one of their family members wished to marry a person from the other side, most people said that this would not be a problem or even that they would be happy. Generally, many felt that this was the decision of the family member, or that the nationality of the family member's partner made no difference: 'If they love each other, what can you do?' (Andrzej, man in his 20s). However, three

¹⁶ All names have been changed to ensure our interviewees' anonymity.

Polish participants were less enthusiastic. One already had such a case in her family and claimed that 'It was not a tragedy.' but that she would worry about the children not learning any Polish (Aneta, woman in her 40s). In the words of another:

I guess it would be kind of shocking, so to speak, because there was nothing like that before... but I don't know, it would seem to me... Well, there would also be a barrier, I mean, I know my friends' experiences, and the families linked with various countries, well, they are, after all, in such a... It is quite difficult to keep such bonds alive, I would associate that with, let's say, family separation, so to speak... I mean family separation, but still, if it's someone's decision, then why not. (Oliwia, woman in her 20s)

On the whole, when Germans described Poles, positive attributes by far outweighed negative ones. Many Germans described Poles as a variety of 'nice', e.g. 'friendly', 'amiable', 'agreeable', and 'open', i.e. 'laid-back', 'sociable', 'openhearted'. Other positive attributes – and ones where Germans saw their countryfellows as lacking – included hospitality, greater care of traditions or Poles' diligence and their business savvy. Other attributes included their religiosity, or greater strictness.

In many ways, how Poles see Germans is very similar to how Germans see Poles. The adjectives mentioned most frequently were 'likeable', 'open', 'cheerful' and 'nice'. Others included 'friendly', 'hospitable' or 'helpful'.

In other ways, there seem to be perceptions of the two nations as mirror images. For example, two Germans mentioned that Poles drink a lot of vodka while two Poles mentioned that Germans drink a lot of beer. Likewise, while some German respondents mentioned – though they did not necessarily criticise – Poles' lack of punctuality and perfectionism, several Poles talked about Germans' punctuality, meticulousness or described them as disciplined and precise. The following quote illustrates the sense of contrast:

Well, no, we are definitely amazed by their perfect organisation, their punctuality is unbelievable, if they promise something, it will definitely happen, while with us it won't, or it will, but with some delay, without hurry, while here they simply have this Prussian, so to speak, precision. (Elżbieta, woman in her 60s)

For some Polish respondents, this was also associated with negative connotations. For example Germans were describe as 'calculated', 'stern' or 'less extrovert' and 'stiff'.

Generally, it looks as though nowadays citizen relations in the border region are very good. For example, when asked in the first interview 'Do you like Poles/Germans?', not one interviewee responded in the negative. Below is an example from an interview with Stanisław, a Polish man in his 30s:

Do you like Germans?

Most of them. For me, yes, the vast majority. I never had any problems.

And how is this manifested?

Mostly in their cordiality. In some kind of, I don't know, hospitality. Well, they have been hosting us here for some time, and they have never taken offence for anything.

Likewise, one German interviewee said: 'Yes, the Poles, I like them, like them very much because, as I said I get along with them well. They immediately accept you into the group. They don't reject you or anything like that.' (Lukas, teenage boy).

We also asked our interviewees about the sensitive issue of trust, first whether one could trust most people in general or whether one had better be careful, and second whether it made any difference if those people were Poles or Germans. Most people responded that trust depended on the individuals in question. For example, 'Well, I trust them, like everyone else. If someone approaches me openly, with open arms, I see no need to treat that person differently.' (Marcin, man in his 30s). Most people explicitly rejected the idea that nationality had anything to do with trustworthiness:

I trust the Germans just as much as the Poles. The Poles just as much as the Germans. Well, there are those and there are those. The Germans steal cars or hide them to commit insurance fraud and say it was the Poles. There are probably Poles who steal cars, and there are Germans who steal the cars. You won't get any negative associations about the topic from me. (Sigrid, woman in her 70s)

In fact, only one of our interviewees – Simon, a young German boy – said that he trusted his own countryfellows more than people from other countries. This particular interviewee is one whose perceptions Poles improved hugely during the course of a project (see below). Three Poles said that one can trust Germans more than Poles. For example:

In my opinion, based on what I heard and on common opinions, Poles are more untrustworthy than Germans.

Untrustworthy?

Exactly, untrustworthy. I never heard about Germans that they are thieves, or something like that, crooks. In my opinion, based on my experience and what I heard, my opinion about them is good. (Jakub, man in his 20s)

Another Polish interviewee who had business dealings with Germans explained that Germans were more trustworthy because they made for more solid customers. At the same time, many of our respondents – Germans above all – jumped to the conclusion that we were asking about crime. Many mentioned that theft was prevalent in the border region but were always careful to attribute this not just to Poles but also Germans and other nationalities.

Four interviewees without prompting explained their sense that there was a Polish-German rapprochement due to being part of Europe or being Europeans: 'They are Europeans, so they are exactly like us. Nothing is hugely different.' (Marion, woman in her 50s). As another example, 'we already are in a European system in which it all practically blurs, the contacts are getting closer and closer, Germans come to us, we come to them.' (Ryszard, man in his 60s). One interviewee even invoked Samuel

Huntington's concept of the 'clash of civilisations'¹⁷ to argue that Poles and Germans were part of the same western civilisation: 'they eat the same things, they drink the same things, swear, smoke cigarettes, well, exactly like us, no difference' (Marcin, man in his 30s).

4.3 Awareness of the Euroregion

We also asked both the project participants and our control group if they had heard of their respective Euroregion. This should be of particular interest to Euroregional staff and project organisers who faithfully display the Euroregional flag or mention the funding source in their opening addresses. Quite a few respondents, when asked if they had heard of the Euroregion said that they had not. Many but not all of them were teenagers who were participating in youth projects, though it should also be noted that one German teenager mentioned the Euroregion without prompting. Several respondents said that they had heard of the Euroregion but were not then able to define it. For example, one respondent mentioned that a border crossing had not been opened because an eagle owl had built its nest there and commented: 'That would be such a Euroregion, right? I'd say.' (Gisela, woman in her 60s). Other respondents mentioned the currency and that Poland had decided not to adopt the Euro.¹⁸ Similarly, below is an exchange with a Polish respondent:

Alright, have you heard anything about the so-called Euroregion?

Yes.

With what do you associate it?

With all of us. With all of us, that's it. I don't know, I think, that we are all equal? There are no divisions of any kind, right? (Zofia, woman in her 30s)

One situation was particularly telling, as the interview was conducted right opposite the flag with the Euroregional logo, pinned to a wooden wall:

Perhaps you've heard of this Euroregion?

Mmh.

Do you know what that is?

Well, just Euro. (Jana, teenage girl)

Several people were quite vague: 'Frankly, I would like to hear an intelligent explanation of what that Euroregion is. But what I think is, that... the Euroregion may... that it is an organisation trying to simply put things together in some place, so to speak.' (Aneta, woman in her 40s). In other cases, it was difficult to tell from people's responses if they really knew what the Euroregion was.

A good number of people had heard of the Euroregion, however. Three of them had had personal experiences with Euroregional employees, and this personal experience had raised their awareness of Euroregional activities. Others got it more or less right, e.g.:

¹⁷ Cf. Huntington, S.P. (2002) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, London: Free Press.

¹⁸ This is not actually correct: officially Poland is an accession state to the Eurozone.

- 'cross-border cooperation of Poland and Germany' (Stefanie, woman in her 20s)
- 'I associate it with something to do with the European Union, some unification, for example, I don't know, let's say co-funding, some kind of bonding.' (Patryk, teenage boy)
- 'Well, exactly, I mean... I guess the Euroregion is this cooperation between cities, for example... yes, that for example...' (Elzbieta, woman in her 60s)
- 'Exchanges like this one, between Poland and Germany. Sport clubs or some societal organizations go from us to Germany, or from Germany to here.' (Filip, man in his 20s)
- 'Polish-German cooperation, some possibility of co-funding projects from the Spree-Neisse-Bóbr Euroregion, in our case.' (Michał, man in his 30s)

It may surprise many that there was no difference between the control group and project participants. One would perhaps expect those who are participating in a project that is financed through the Euroregions to have heard of them more than those who are not. Nevertheless, among the German and Polish control interviewees, just as in the case of the project participants, some had not heard of this, many claimed to have heard of it but did not then know what it was about, but two German and one Polish control interviewees could define it correctly. This indicates that participating in a project alone does not make people recognise it, though personal contact with a Euroregional representative might.

4.4 The project and other contact situations, and opinion change

Most participants were involved in the project through their membership in an organisation, such as a club or through voluntary organisations. In all these cases, participation was by choice. Others had developed an interest in the other side through a previous Polish-German project and wished to continue their interactions with people from the other side. This was the case for projects that took place repeatedly but also for altogether different Polish-German projects. One painter had heard of the existence of painters' plein-airs by visiting the closing exhibition of one. In yet other cases the organiser contacted potential participants who had taken part in similar projects before.

For many youth projects, recruitment took place through schools or youth organisations. In some cases, particularly good or well-behaved students were rewarded with the chance to go. In others, students were obliged to participate, though none of them resented this, as they were all happy to go. Yet others went because their friends persuaded them.

A few people had heard of a project through their work, e.g. their work in a municipal administration or in a school:

Well, I first became aware of this through a professional development catalogue. Then we gathered some adequate information on the internet, then they sent us the programme and the amended programme, and then we decided that we simply have to attend. There is nothing better. (Isabell, woman in her 30s)

Clearly, there are a lot of networks on both sides of the border, where so-called multipliers have access to a large group of members. This means that these members – young people, members of certain professions, and people with special interests and pastimes, such as a particular sport or hobby, are particularly likely to be recruited. The example of village fetes shows that many Polish-German events are open to the general public, but some social groups, such as the unemployed, or people who do not pursue their hobbies in clubs, seem less likely to be recruited to a small project. If the aim is to reach as many people as possible, it would be desirable to encourage new project organisers to apply for small projects funding and to encourage more vocational projects that tap into potential participants' professional interests.

Another key challenge is to turn these existing multiplier networks into genuine cross-border networks between Polish and German participants, which are an important aspect of social capital. As mentioned above, for trust to develop, the contact situation must first of all be pleasant. Moreover, it cannot be cursory and superficial but rather has to be personal and thorough. Finally, the participants should have a comparable social status.

To start with the latter, in two youth projects, the participants differed in terms of age and family background. This was noticed by the respondents and could sometimes create conflict. For example, in one project the German participants were teenagers, while the Polish children were between 7 and 13 years old. This caused some – though by no means all – of the German participants to grumble. Likewise, in another youth project, the German participants were from broken families, while the Polish participants were not. In the interviews, some Polish participants hinted that this may have caused some divergence.

Communication is a very important component of personal, pleasant contact. Not surprisingly, communication between Poles and Germans is generally hindered by the language barrier. For example, in one project, we observed groups forming along linguistic lines – Polish, German and English – during the break. However, while the language barrier made in-depth conversations difficult, all our interviewees from the projects and our control group indicated that it was possible to understand each other, using English or body language. Moreover, some Polish participants spoke German, though hardly any German participants spoke any Polish. When one of the participants speaks the other language, thorough contact is possible:

Last night, for example, they sat with the director, the uh [inaudible], had dinner and talked about political developments in Germany, Poland, so, very animated political conversations uh, where you realise that the problems that exist on both sides are actually quite similar. So ... as I said, very different things, themes [were] discussed, everything under the sun. It was interesting, it was fun.

Um, and how did they communicate with the director?

Well, she knows a little German [inaudible]. We managed alright, yes. So, a very animated conversation. (Karl-Heinz, man in his 70s)

As far as the contact situation itself is concerned, we were able to observe a range of behaviours. For example, the content of some projects such as certain vocational projects, by nature offers little opportunity for the Polish and German participants to

mingle – within their national groups nor across them. Certain artistic activities, for example, seem to be primarily a solitary activity. In such circumstances, it is even more important to have a strong supporting programme on the side of the main activity of a project to enable more than cursory contact. In one such case, a variety of activities had been planned. One event in particular, when a band came to play, was mentioned again and again. The participants we interviewed were unanimous in arguing that this had been great for socialising:

Well, when the band played, and then it also turned into a jam session where we could play. I also joined in. That was ... That was fun. ... I just took the guitar that's there, and then played around with it. Others too, well, there were quite a few who also play instruments, or a few. I had fun. It went on till three, from eight to three, well, with a break of course, but that was really good. And... yeah, that was brilliant. (Sven, man in his 30s)

Blues and rock, well it was very nice music, a lot of beer, a whole bathtub full of beer bottles, and everyone went there and drank, and it was really fun, together we had fun, danced, and it was really merry, and for those who spoke German fluently, well, when one had a glass in their hand of course the tongue got a bit more relaxed and those conversations went even more smoothly, right? It was precisely a gathering with a music band, it was very nice. (Ryszard, man in his 60s)

In other projects, there was hardly any programme to frame the event and bring people together outside of the main activity. For example, in a sporting event, apart from the welcome dinner when everyone sat separately and the Polish participants left soon thereafter, there were no activities surrounding the sport. As one of them put it:

And did you make contact with any Germans?

No, because there was no time for that. The ball rolled too quickly.

There was no time for that?

No, I concentrated on the game, obviously, and not on making contacts.

You did not speak to any German?

No. (Andrzej, man in his 20s)

The German participants noticed and criticised the fact that there were hardly any Poles to mingle with. They suggested that a party or a barbecue or a camp fire would have been great to bring people together. One of them had been there the year before, when there had been a party in a marquee, which he had found preferable:

Yes, well, they certainly must do something else, so that really, say after the [tournament] that then at least the barbecue is fired up for example, or a campfire started so that one can just... really sit together, all the teams, that would have been better.

Mmh.

Because it was really like this, tournament and that's it... Like that you can't get to know any people. That was a bit sad. (Holger, man in his 20s)

In some of the village fetes, very little interaction between some Germans and Poles took place. For example, on one occasion, the seats for the Polish group were

sectioned off from those for the Germans, so that no interaction was possible, unless they walked around (which some of them did). To be sure, there were good reasons for such an arrangement. According to the organisers, the Poles were seen as guests of honour and were supposed to have a central space reserved for them. It also helps with the translation if the group sits together. However, it hampered integration. As one organiser put it: 'Also because this is all funded through the Euroregion, it is also important not just to invite them, seat them at a table and 'Have fun', so to say, but also [to organise] such cultural affairs, sporting affairs we already have, competitions...' (Organiser interview DE26).

In another village fete, many of the German guests contributed actively to the theme of the fete with their own costumes and their own stand related to the theme. This permitted for some interaction, for example, with the people at the other stands or with the guests, which two of the Germans described as very pleasant. However, according to one of the visitors, the other guests merely attended as 'accessories' (Organiser interview DE16). The same organiser criticised the fact that a large number of Germans were only invited to get access to funding. However, opportunities to interact were clearly there for those who were seeking them. For example, separate from the official programme, two German teenagers who had become interested in Poland through a previous network project spontaneously became acquainted with a group of Polish youths. They thought that this had been a great success: 'Simply awesome. Simply awesome. I would, if it were possible, go there every day, honestly. Better there than in Germany.' (Lukas, teenage boy).

In some projects, notably a seminar in Poland, there were essentially no opportunities for exchange, as there were hardly any Poles present beside the organisers. Some Polish passers-by were present during the festivities in the city after the seminar. One of us overheard two middle-aged men joking that 'the mayor brought German pensioners', and 'look, a Polish [band] playing German music, they should play Chopin instead'.

In projects that involve an element of – in youth projects in particular – teenagers tend to share a room or a tent. However, only in one project that we observed did they live in mixed Polish and German groups. One organiser explained that Polish and German participants did not live together because 'one should not overburden them' (Organiser interview DE7).

Sometimes interaction cannot be forced and happens quite spontaneously. For example, on the first day of one vocational project, the Polish and German participants kept separate for lunch, coffee and dinner, not least because communication was difficult. However, after dinner several members of the Polish group sat together until late, doing crafts, drinking liqueur and singing Polish songs. A few Germans were also present and tried to learn the songs. For a long time, no translator was present, but this did not appear to cause any problems. As one put it:

Yes, well, as I said, that was very nice, and what struck me very positively was that the Polish women are very, very sociable and... and sang songs, knew the lyrics and were merry. Really, without ever letting up. So that was a really great affair, lovely, and in fact for us that was a really, really

nice start into this whole week on the first night. (Margarethe, woman in her 60s)

Likewise, at a sports project, it initially did not look as though there were many opportunities for interaction apart from the main event. However, during the barbecue that took place during lunchtime on one of those days we observed at one of the tables Germans and Poles sitting together and speaking a mixture of Polish and German.

Generally, it can be said that three things are excellent mediators, though not all of them can (or should) be promoted. The first is alcohol: quite a few participants mentioned that they got closer to people from the other side over a beer or during a party. The second is love interest: many male Germans in particular mentioned that they thought Polish women were lovely. And in those romantic situations, the language barrier is not usually a problem: 'Well, last night Klaus, Rüdi, Peter and I we simply grabbed a few Polish girls and then we danced with them.' (Paul, teenage boy). Likewise, there were Polish-German love stories during one of the youth projects and during a village fete. Interpreters are the final mediator. This does not only mean that they facilitate communication between the participants. Rather, a lot of participants established personal relationships with interpreters, and often the interpreters were the first ones whom participants recognised from past projects.

To be sure, there can sometimes also be conflicts or misunderstandings, though we only observed one: during a youth camp, one of the German boys caused a stir by throwing some yoghurt into the Polish group over breakfast. This provoked some animosity on both sides, and certain Polish and German boys threatened to beat each other up. When asked why the guardians were not intervening, one girl said 'Nope, they don't pick up on that.' (Yvonne, teenage girl). Indeed, we noticed that the guardians in this particular project were often sitting together but not spending much time with the kids, thus missing events such as the yoghurt incident. This was unfortunate because, on this occasion, the guardians missed an important opportunity to teach the teenagers about conflict resolution.

In a different project, one German boy was mystified why many Poles did not understand his jokes about Poles:

Yes, in principle they are actually quite nice, but they don't talk to you. Also, they laugh... well, I don't know, when I try to make my jokes in English, they don't laugh at all. For instance, the Polish jokes: 'Just leave my car here.' or something like that. Something like that, somehow they don't laugh. Dunno.

Do they have a completely different sense of humour or none at all or ...?

I think they have a different sense of humour. I think what we find funny, they don't find so funny. (Fabian, teenage boy)

In other instances, sporting rivalries led to some minor complaints: 'Outside the pitch everything was cool, I have nothing against them. And on the pitch it was a bit fierce, some fouls, but well, I'm not angry, because you know, its sport, and a game, and of course a contest, right?' (Jakub, man in his 20s). In the same project, the Germans felt that the referee was biased. However, contrary to what social psychologists have

claimed, the competitive spirit did not cause any animosity, as some German players considered this to be quite natural: 'If we were playing on our side and our home referee [was in charge], he simply is biased... Now that's completely normal that he might let us get away with one or two things, and for the others perhaps in the same situation, he obviously blows the whistle.' (Ingo, man in his 30s).

All in all, exchanges during projects tend to be very positive experiences. In accordance with the idea that pleasant contact promotes trust, one would perhaps expect for perceptions of the neighbours to change. However, for the vast majority of our interviewees, no opinion change occurred. This is not because anything went wrong during the project but rather because participants' perceptions were already very good at the start of the project. In fact, many participants reflected on an epiphany that they had had before the project, often as part of another project. To give but one example, one interviewee recalled how she first developed an interest in Poland:

So, I have to say all those years, Poland did not really exist for me. And I had an aunt in Aachen, and they had in earlier times been in Poland, and they also lived there and were more or less expelled and had to flee. And she once told me how beautiful it is there and so on. And then I got to know these three elderly ladies from her circle who always talked about [it], too, and then I always became so curious and already made up my mind then. And then by accident – again, it was meant to be – the request arrived [...] three years ago, and then I just said yes right away.

And this first experience brought about a major change in her perceptions of Poland:

And Poland is really so beautiful, well, I was really thrilled the first time. By now I love Poland. So, like that, it has become a part of my life. (Marion, woman in her 50s)

The fact that many people – project participants and control interviewees – had such excellent prior experiences explains the fact that initial opinions were so good and that in most cases, no change in perceptions of the other side occurred during the course of a project.

However, in five cases, we identified some change. In two of these, this was a change for the worse and directly resulted from the yoghurt incident mentioned above. For example, Yvonne had been looking forward to the camp but afterwards said 'Anything to do with the Poles – no thank you.' She elaborated 'Oh, they are always snitching and bitching, threatening us with a pounding. ... I'm glad when I'm out of here, and then good.' When asked if she liked Poles after this experience, she responded 'Nope. Well, I have to say, the first two days it was okay. This has then gradually built up. It just got worse and worse.' A German boy from the same camp described the same incident and claimed that he no longer wanted to meet any Poles:

Okay. Well, alright. And now would you at all feel like getting to know Poland somehow a little bit better, friends...

Not anymore, not now. Well, now I'm sick of it. But my opinion about it has not changed. (Paul, teenage boy)

He claimed that this did not constitute any opinion change, although he had previously claimed 'Basically, I get along with everyone.' It should also be noted that the third German interviewee as well as the Polish interviewees who did not notice the earlier conflict, expressed no such animosity. Nevertheless, this confirms social psychologists' – plausible – argument that an unpleasant experience will not lead to an improvement in perceptions; on the contrary, it can lead to a deterioration.

In three cases, a noticeable improvement took place in participants' opinions. Two of them took place through youth projects. Simon, a German teenager, was in Poland for the first time, for a youth project. In the initial interview, his attitude towards Poles was sceptical. He had no Polish friends and wanted none. While he did not distrust Poles, he also thought they 'don't make a good impression'. He described them as not clean and unpleasant: 'Poles aren't really my cup of tea.' (Simon, teenage boy). Minutes after the interview, he was already playing football with the Polish boys.

After the project, Simon said 'The Poles were actually really great.' He found two friends with whom he wanted to stay in touch via Facebook and SMS. He would like to visit them but thought this was unlikely to happen, due to the long drive. Asked whether he liked Poles, he now responded 'Yes, I do like them.' The visit to the Polish side had influenced his opinions of Poles 'positively, very positively', and many contacts with Polish children had led to a situation where 'you know how the Poles tick' (Simon, teenage boy).

Fabian was a German teenager who had had some previous experience with Poles in a youth project and who had joined a trip for a village fete. His initial opinions were not unfavourable, but in the initial interview, he suggested that he would enjoy cracking the occasional joke about Poles if he had a Polish neighbour or colleague. After a good experience on the Polish side, where he found a girlfriend, he said 'Due to my experience, I can say, the Poles are in fact alright.' When confronted again with the colleague scenario, he said: 'Yes, now I'd have to say it would be cool. With me, it is just about if he's nice to me, if he's normal or if he acts the macho and thinks he is the greatest and so on, then it would be different, but if he were a normal guy, as I have got to know the Poles today, so like most of them, then ... yes, alright.' (Fabian, teenage boy).

When reflecting on his changed opinions, he said: 'The day was just awesome. Can't put it any other way. It was so awesome. So in principle, all the Poles, they were actually really nice. While we didn't... we wanted to sit down somewhere, sat down, we didn't actually understand anything, but they had no problem with our sitting on the bench. In itself ... I just find Poland simply cool now. It's also because of the relationship, of course, but otherwise, even without the relationship I would describe the Poles as simply awesome. It's the limit. I think it's great.' (Fabian, teenage boy).

Finally, Krzysztof, a young Polish boy who was participating in a sports project did not necessarily have bad opinions of Germans but was quite sceptical about certain situations. This became most obvious when he was asked how he would react if a family member married a German, he answered:

I don't know about that. I would be surprised. ...

You don't know? So you would be surprised. Why?

Because Germans ... I mean... I don't know, actually.

It would be unusual?

Yes.

In the second interview, there was a noticeable difference in his answer to the same question, something that Krzysztof admitted was due to his positive experience:

How would you react if someone from your family married a German?

Well, I would be very happy, because it's good to have family from, say, another country, because you can, say, learn a lot, various, say, words, or something about their interests, if they have any.

...

And you think that perhaps your approach to them has changed?

Yes.

And why do you think that happened, what changed?

Because we got to know each other better. (Krzysztof, teenage boy)

While most respondents did not undergo such massive change, everyone was very much in favour of the idea of small projects in order to promote opinion change. Here are some responses to the question if this idea was successful:

I do think so, I do think so. Because, as I said, after all, due to the Second World War we have done great, great injustice to the Poles. So it is of course nice if Poles now come here and when you... when they get to know us. Back then, of course, were also just children, when that all happened, but if these negative opinions, especially about Germans, if we can soften that, I think, that's important. (Margarethe, woman in her 60s)

Yes. Because still, I don't know about Germany, but in Poland there are still stereotypes, right? That is, I mean, coming back, because we still have World War II events in mind, right? We react negatively to Germans around us, many people react negatively and I think, that it is necessary to overcome that attitude, to see that, well, that we are not all bad, right? Some people don't realise that – I say, because we keep coming back to the World War II situation – that some things did not depend on the will of those people, right? Well, it was the same in Poland, during that war you either execute orders, right? Either you do it, or we will kill all your family, or for example we had a certain leadership, and it was definitely difficult for all the people to revolt, because back then they lived in fear, right? I think that people should come and see that we are actually all the same. (Zofia, woman in her 30s)

As far as the continuation of existing networks is concerned, it became very clear was that small projects often promote the continuation of existing contacts. Thus, in some of the projects we observed, certain participants already knew each other from previous projects and had been looking forward to seeing each other again in the context of a project. Many of the people we interviewed were willing to participate in a future project, intended to stay in touch with some people from the other side they had met, or both.

For example, when one German participant was asked if he would come again next year, he responded: 'Definitely. But then I hope I can speak a little Polish.' (Holger, man in his 20s). Below is another example:

Will you keep in touch with them?

Well, we will, of course. Yes.

As you have been doing before, I assume?

Yes. Well, I think this will come out a bit better. (Małgorzata, woman in her 50s)

Several respondents also mentioned that they were planning their own Polish-German activities. For example, as a result of a painters' plein-air, several artists were planning joint exhibitions. Likewise, two German boys who fell in love during the village fete on the Polish side decided to go more often to visit their new girlfriends. Only a handful of people were doubtful about whether they would keep in touch or participate in future projects, though nobody said 'No' for certain. Margarethe (woman in her 60s), for example, had met a very nice Polish lady in a previous project but felt that they had not become close enough in one week to stay in touch. This suggests that small projects are successful to an extent in promoting networks, but often one event is not sufficient for the establishment of networks. Rather, it takes a few meetings for people to get to know each other sufficiently to pursue their own activities outside the context of a project. That said, the people who regularly organise cross-border projects are most likely to establish lasting networks. Therefore they often play the role of network brokers that coordinate and facilitate cross-border contacts of other Poles and Germans.

Aside from the participants themselves, sometimes locals were also drawn into project activities. For example, during an artistic project, some German locals were initially frightened by one of the Polish participants and called the police when they saw her in town. However, when it turned out that she was a project participant, they invited her to coffee to apologise and showed her around the village. The same people visited the closing event later in the week. Likewise, a potentially very active town partnership and eventual citizen exchanges resulted from one of the seminars. Finally, one of the vocational projects took the shape of a competition that was open to the public, and several locals did make an appearance. In other words, some small projects have the potential of engaging people beyond the regular participants, though this cannot always be planned for.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

This research has examined the effect of small projects on social capital in the Polish-German border region. Our starting point were social psychological studies that have shown that pleasant, personal contact that allows people to bond over shared goals, can bring about a sense of trust between members of different nations. Moreover, small projects are designed to promote personal networks among the inhabitants of the border region, thus contributing towards an increase in 'social capital' in that region. In order to examine the effect of these people-to-people events, we visited 17 small projects in the region in 2013 and conducted 168 interviews with project participants, organisers and programme administrators.

As part of our research design, we interviewed both project participants and members of a control group. The behaviour in the border region and initial opinions were very similar between the control group and the actual project participants, showing that small projects do not attract an atypical group of people and that many different people could potentially become project participants. Indeed, several project participants and members of our control group had heard of the Euroregions and their activities. This is particularly true for those who had experienced personal contact with a Euroregional representative. At the same time, quite a few people had not heard of the Euroregions or were unable to define what these Euroregions do.

We found that municipalities are the most common organisers. In general, project organisers are enthusiastic about the SPF, but some problems arise from the complex administration of the fund, which discourages some smaller clubs or NGOs from applying.

Our research showed that the border region is a site of lively and regular exchanges, though geography still plays a part insofar as towns and municipalities that lie closest to the border are sites of particularly regular, albeit often cursory, exchanges. Those people who go to the other side frequently also have a strong sense of familiarity and hardly any fear of contact. Generally, it looks as though nowadays citizen relations in the border region are very cordial.

Small projects are an excellent way of bringing about contact between Poles and Germans around a common theme. At the same time, surrounding activities are as important as the project theme itself, and well-planned activities can make all the difference between success and disappointment. That said, some interactions cannot be planned for and spontaneous interaction with locals or during a village fete can also lead to improved perceptions.

In the vast majority of our interviews, the participants already had such favourable opinions of the other side that we were not able to observe any opinion change. Indeed, trust in the neighbours seems far more common than distrust. In fact, many participants reflected on an epiphany that they had before the project, often as part of another project. However, in the cases of three project participants outlined above, a noticeable improvement took place in their opinions.

Moreover, during our research it became very clear that small projects often promote the continuation of existing contacts. In some cases, participants already

knew each other from previous projects and looked forward to seeing each other again in the context of a project. The vast majority of our interviewees were either willing to participate in a future project or intended to stay in touch with some people from the other side they had met. Thus, small projects are extremely important in aiding the continuation of existing networks as well as the creation of new ones. However, networks take time to establish, and experiencing pleasant, personal encounters in the context of a small project are not sufficient to kick-start such networks. Rather, this takes at least two or more such experiences.

In conclusion, Polish-German citizen relations in the borderlands have come a long way since 1991, when neo-Nazis threw stones at Polish buses arriving in Frankfurt/Oder. The border region is now a site of lively and cordial exchanges. The SPF has no doubt contributed much towards this. However, more work remains to be done in the area of cross-border networks.¹⁹ Moreover, the growing complexity of the SPF risks undermining some of these early achievements. However, with some relatively simple adjustments, and some more challenging ones, the fund can continue to make a positive contribution in the Polish-German border region

These findings leads us to our set of recommendations. We divide these between our recommendations for project organisers that are also relevant to the people who choose and scrutinise these projects, and our recommendations for the design of the SPF itself. These latter ones can be seen as suggestions for the 2014-2020 funding period that are intended to help perfect the fund further.

5.1 Recommendations in terms of project organisation

1) A substantive theme for the project is desirable.

Some projects had a much stronger theme than others, for example over a common profession, a common hobby or a cultural area of interest. These projects automatically allowed participants to talk about the joint activity. Even in one of the village fetes we observed, there was a common theme that permitted members of the the other side to become more actively involved than they would have done without the common theme. In general, such thematically oriented projects are more promising than those that merely seek to bring Poles and Germans together for no other reason than that they are Poles and Germans. A strong thematic orientation also helps to ensure additional results, e.g. professional knowledge exchange or skills development.

2) Plan for 'surrounding activities'.

In some of the projects we visited, it was the activities that took place on the side of the actual project that were most effective in bringing Poles and Germans together. In one of them, a band came to play during the evening. In another, a big barbecue took place for all participants. During these events, participants were able to make a genuine connection. In contrast, many participants were disappointed by the lack of any such activities in one of the sports projects, as it offered them no

¹⁹ There is still a significant number of municipalities and enterprises in the border region that are not involved in any cross-border cooperation, or their involvement is very limited. See Raczyk, A., Dołzbłasz, S. and Leśniak-Johann, M. (2012) *Relacje współpracy i konkurencji na pograniczu polsko-niemieckim*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Gaskor.

real chance to get to know people from the other side. For this reason, surrounding activities should be encouraged wherever possible.

3) Allowing teenagers an input into the project content will help to engage them more.

Young children will easily be enthused by the thematic content and activities that adult project organisers decide for them. However, it is far more difficult to engage teenagers, who can sometimes find an imposed project content boring. Allowing 15-or 16-year olds a say over the project content even before an application is made, and allowing them to shape the surrounding activities to some extent, is far more effective in stimulating enthusiasm than deciding this without any consultation. More generally, ensuring that prospective project participants are interested in the topic of the project will more likely lead to a successful project.

4) In youth projects, try to bring together Poles and Germans of comparable age. Moreover, if young participants differ noticeably in terms of their family background, motivated pedagogues should be ready to step in.

In two of the youth projects we visited the participants differed vastly in terms of age and family background. This was noticed by the respondents and could sometimes create potential conflict, although not necessarily so. Conversely, a youth project that brought together Poles and Germans from comparably difficult family backgrounds, had no such potential for conflict. However, particularly in the case of youth projects, it would then be necessary to have trained and motivated pedagogues present who can use a conflict situation to teach the teenagers about conflict resolution.

5) Seminars can have a positive effect if they are embedded in a broader thematic framework.

Generally, there is little chance to socialise during one-day seminar, especially if there are no 'surrounding activities' (see above). This does not mean that seminars should not be funded, as they play a role in the development of professional knowledge and skills. Moreover, information about some aspect of the border region's heritage can also be food for thought, but often participants are disappointed if they get no chance at all to interact with people from the other side. Conversely, one-day seminars that are embedded in a broader framework such as a series of events, or that are followed by a big social event such as a concert, will offer such opportunities for interaction. This should be encouraged.

6) Village fetes should be devised around a joint element and only receive SPF money for the joint element.

Village fetes are perhaps the type of event that is most likely to lose sight of the Polish-German element. To be sure, such events pose a particular challenge for organisers in terms of seating arrangements or translators. However, this should not be an excuse to invite some 'alibi Germans' or 'alibi Poles' to fund the festivities. Rather, interaction between the locals and the guests – which some organisers already seek to promote – should be encouraged. It follows also that funding should be confined to the actual joint element such as the trip, joint meals or joint activities. This would reward those thoughtful organisers who take the time and trouble to devise some joint activities such as competitions or dances during a village fete.

5.2 Recommendations in terms of the management of the SPF

1) Simplify the application form and the application process.

Simpler application procedures and the smaller amount of bureaucracy connected with the SPF, as compared to large projects, are one of the main assets of the fund. They are supposed to encourage even small clubs and NGOs to apply. However, the application form is often seen as too – and increasingly – cumbersome, which has the effect of discouraging some potential applicants. For this reason, there is potential scope for revising and simplifying the application form and application process.

2) Encourage thematic content.

The thematic content of a project is one of the main points of conversation for the participants and offers many opportunities to bond over. In fact, it is also one of the ways to attract like-minded people. Mixing teachers with teachers, basketballers with basketballers, or historically interested people with other historically interested people increases the chances of the resulting contact being pleasant and fruitful. In one of the projects we visited, the organiser described how the proposed project had been initially criticised by Euroregional staff for being too thematically focused. The reasoning behind this was that a programme full of thematically focused activities may not offer sufficient chances for people to interact. However, we observed that, on the contrary, the common theme succeeded in bringing the participants together, which also led to increased interactions in ad hoc evening activities after the official part of the programme had ended.

3) Include in the application form a section on 'surrounding activities' next to the main activity of the project.

Particularly when the main activity of the project involves some solitary work or little chance for conversation, say during a sporting competition, surrounding activities can be one of the main areas where people can bond. For example, a concert, a barbecue, joint cooking or a party at the end can all promote such interaction. Project organisers should be encouraged to think about this by including a section in the application form. If the form is simplified in other sections, this should not lead to too much additional effort. In some types of events, such as seminars or village fetes, organising successful surrounding activities can be more difficult, but even then there are chances to promote interaction during joint meals. The details of seating or sleeping arrangements should remain at the discretion of the organisers who often have a good understanding based on experience of what works and what would overtax the participants.

4) Make the territory where SPF money can be spent more flexible.

Currently there is a constraint on where SPF money can be spent, which limits the number of partners that organisers can work with. While it is not impossible to organise a project with a partner from a different Euroregion, it is much more difficult and uncertain whether such an application will be successful. This sometimes means that long-standing partnerships are encumbered or that one side finds it difficult to find partners on the other side. Relaxing the requirement would help to address this problem.

5) Speed up the accounting and reimbursement process. Consider pre-financing.

The cumbersome accounting process, which requires organisers to budget even for plasters, means that the administrative effort for a small project is seen by organisers as not much simpler than that for large projects (and this is contrary to the main idea of the small projects fund). The long duration of the reimbursement process is seen as a particular problem, although this is handled much more swiftly in some Euroregions than others. On the whole, the long-winded process has discouraged many potential applicants from applying, limiting the pool of possible projects. Moreover, it seems that this is advantageous for beneficiaries that already have available resources, while organisations with limited resources could be seen as disadvantaged. Making the accounting process more flexible – e.g. by allowing for emergency budget items that may or may not be used – and by considerably speeding up the process would help. However, if the programme authorities are serious about encouraging even small clubs to apply, even more assistance would be needed. For some applicants, notably small clubs or NGOs, it would be best to allow pre-financing, e.g. through regional or national funds.

6) Send Euroregional representatives to observe more to projects.

In many cases, our research has shown that the only way to find out what goes on in a project is to visit it. Actually observing a project or part of a project can help to flag up or even fix other problems, such as where there are perhaps more signatures on the participant lists than participants. More site visits could also help to introduce an element of control over how the money is spent, and could compensate for making the application and accounting process simpler. Likewise, our research has shown that people are far more likely to remember and recognise the Euroregion if they have met a person who works there. To be sure, Euroregional resources are too limited to send staff to a majority of projects, but sending representatives to more projects than currently would go a long way. Such a reallocation of working time of Euroregional staff from office-based control activities to field visits during key project events might be more effective and beneficial in the long run. It could help to reduce bureaucracy, to make Euroregions more visible for project participants, and last but not least, Euroregional staff could gain first-hand knowledge on – good and bad – project practices. Consequently, this knowledge could be disseminated through the Euroregions to current or future beneficiaries.

7) Consider letting good projects be repeated without reducing the co-financing rate.

Sometimes participating in small projects can lead to improved trust, though we have also observed some conflict leading to a deterioration in perceptions. However, networks are the element where the SPF has most to contribute because they are still only weakly developed in the Polish-German border region. As it can take several projects for people to develop their own networks and continue their contacts outside the frame of a project, it should be permitted to repeat particularly successful projects without reducing the co-financing rate, as is already possible in Euroregion Pomerania, for example.

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