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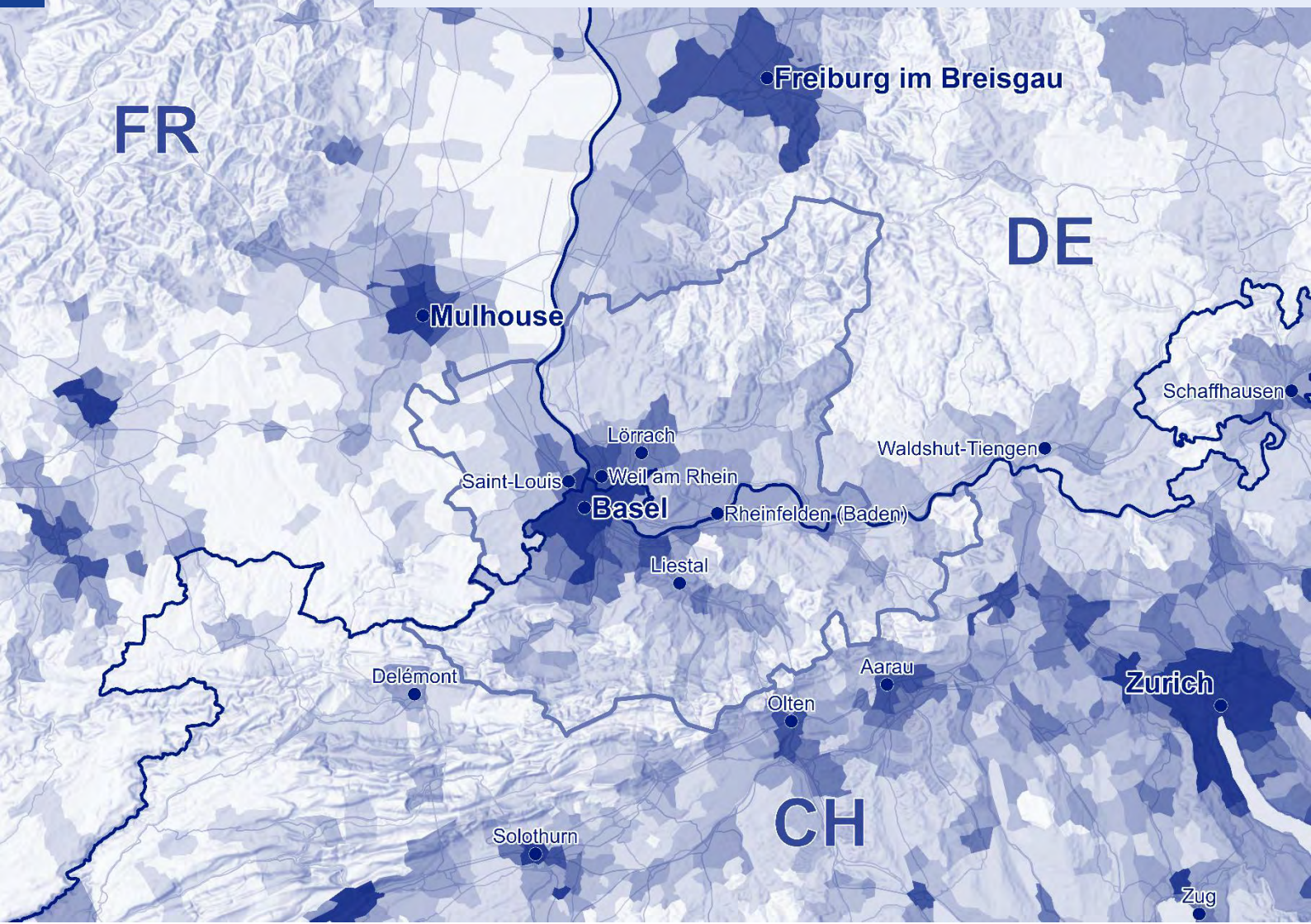
CROSSGOV

Governance mechanisms for cross-border
functional areas

Case study report X //

Trinational Eurodistrict Basel (CH/DE/FR)

March 2026



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Coordination:

Andreea China, Martin Gauk, Nikos Lampropoulos, Nicolas Rossignol, and Ramona Tanasa – ESPON EGTC

Authors

Tobias Chilla, Elias Günther, Stefan Hippe – Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg
Mátyás Jaschitz, Kitti Dubniczki, Roland Hesz, Viktória Jánosi, László Darányi – CESCO Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives
Roland Gaugitsch, Manon Badouix, Erich Dallhammer – ÖIR

Steering Committee

Silvia Jost, Sébastien Rieben – Federal Office for Spatial Development ARE (CH)
Milada Hronkova – Ministry of Regional Development, Department of European Territorial Cooperation (CZ)
Josiane Meier - Federal Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building, Division Spatial Planning, Spatial Planning Law and European Spatial Development Policy BMWBSB (DE)
Christina Bezes-Feldmeyer, Axel Drochon – Agence nationale de la cohésion des territoires (FR)
Jean Peyrony – Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière MOT (FR)
Laszlo Gere, Csilla Szalóky-Hoffmann – Ministry of Public Administration and Regional Development, Deputy State Secretary for the Implementation of Regional Development (HU)
Kevin Lynch – Southern Regional Assembly in Assembly House, Waterford (IE)
Sébastien Keiffer, Olivier Bichel – Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning, Department of Spatial Planning (LU)
Maria Sioliou, Gaelle Doleans – Unit D2 Interreg, Cross-Border Cooperation, Internal Borders, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission (EC-DG Regio)

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Contact: info@espon.eu

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1 Introduction

The CROSSGOV project, financed by the ESPON Programme, focuses on Governance mechanisms for cross-border functional areas. It aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of cross-border functional areas across the ESPON space (i.e. EU plus EFTA member states). The CROSSGOV project is based on a multi-layered data set that comprises multiple dimensions. It can be explored separately via the [CROSSGOV Hub](#). The indicators include official statistics and various 'new' data approaches to provide new insights into cross-border flows, connections and cooperation.

The CROSSGOV project supports EU, national, and regional policies in answering the following key questions:

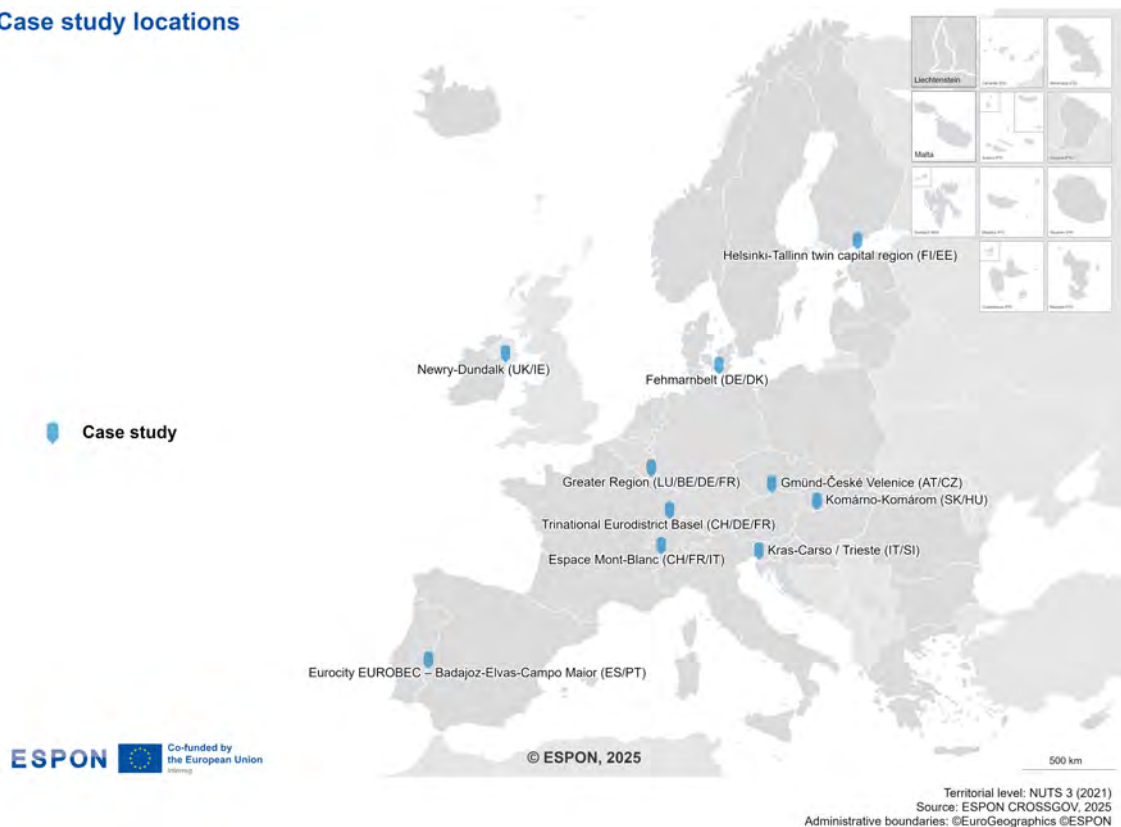
- How to define cross-border functional areas across Europe? How to calibrate the analytical definitions with the actual realities of functional cross-border areas where people live and work in?
- What are the main patterns and dynamics as well as challenges and solutions within these border regions?
- Which governance structures are in place in cross-border regions? How to ensure vertical and horizontal policy coherence to capitalise on the potentials in cross-border functional areas?

The project is organised in three tasks. Tasks 1 and 2 address the European level, whereas Task 3, focuses on analysing the functional areas and governance structures of the selected case study areas. This includes a 'Futures Workshop' conducted with regional stakeholders, expert interviews as well as a review of documents and data.

The case study report at hand, along with the other reports, contributes directly to the cross-cutting analysis of the case studies (see Case study report XI). Map 1 localises the ten case studies.

Map 1 // Case study locations

Case study locations



This study first provides a summary of the main characteristics, including geographical aspects as well as functional perimeters and linkages within the case study area. The following chapter introduces the main territorial and governance aspects of the given area. One of the main outcomes of the study is the chapter dedicated to future perspectives, focussing both on instrumental and spatial aspects and the potential thematic areas of cooperation. The chapter concludes with a table that summarises the key features of the main potential solutions in relation to the primary topics of cooperation and provides some best practices in this regard.

Central to this case study is the Basel metropolitan area, spanning parts of Switzerland, Germany and France. In addition to the Trinational Eurodistrict Basel (TEB) as the starting point, two further relevant governance structures were identified: the Agglo Basel at the local level and the Upper Rhine Conference on a larger scale.

This report is based on a mixed-methods approach, bringing together data-driven insights from the CROSSGOV project and expert assessment from key regional stakeholders. To understand the spatial dynamics and areas of interest, and to identify key functional linkages, interviews were conducted in March 2025 with representatives of the two main local cross-border governance structures in the Basel border region: the Trinational Eurodistrict Basel (TEB) and the Agglo Basel. Based on these findings and the analyses of several documents, the future workshop of this case study was implemented in the framework of the working group 'Spatial Planning' committee meeting of the Trinational Eurodistrict Basel (TEB). Seven experts from the multi-level governance context took part in an interactive discussion with two CROSSGOV moderators about the Basel border region's development path (including representatives of the TEB, the Trinational Metropolitan Region Upper Rhine and both Canton of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft).

The findings of this case study as well as the parallel ones contributed to the development of the 'cross-border functional area' (CBFA) approach. The differing of perceptions, experiences, and approaches in the case study regions helped to align the definition of CBFAs as a European territorial category. This territorial category comprises those areas that have a strong cross-border dimension due to relations and flows. For more details, please see the '[Regional focus](#)' section on the CROSSGOV Hub. The case study reports do not refer to the CBFAs, as they were developed in parallel and not available for the workshops. While the case study findings are also based on expert assessment, the CBFA methodology relies primarily on quantitative data. For more methodological details, please see Scientific Annex I.

2 The cross-border region in a nutshell

The Basel region is a remarkable case for cross-border integration and governance arrangements. Hardly any other region shows higher flows of people across the border on a daily basis. On aerial photos of the highly urbanized region, the state borders between Switzerland, France, and Germany are not visible (anymore).

Going back to 1946, the airport of Basel was opened, and already at this time organised as a cross-border infrastructure between Switzerland and France. In 1963, the foundation of the Regio Basiliensis was one of the first regional institutions focusing on cross-border topics. Today, socio-economic flows across the borders are a fundamental characteristic of the region, and the formats of cross-border governance are numerous.

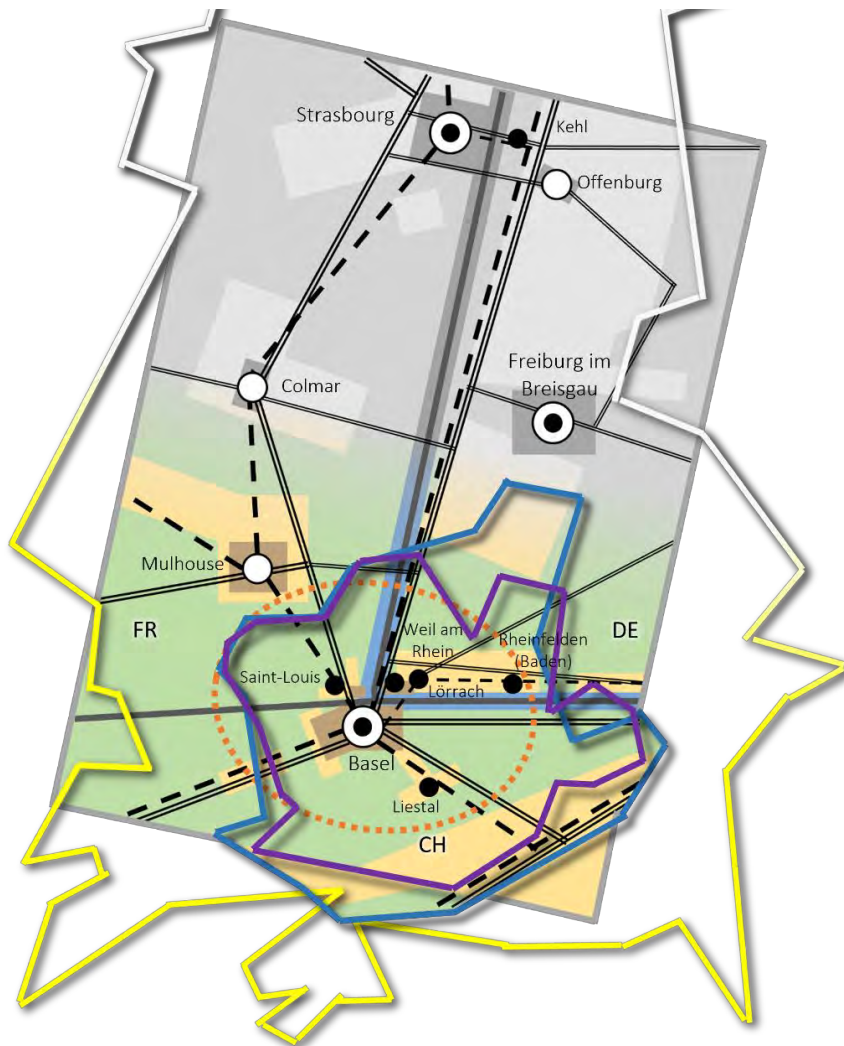
In this document, the focus is on the Trinational Eurodistrict Basel (TEB), one of four Eurodistricts in the Upper Rhine region. Both in the horizontal and vertical dimension of the **governance system**, a series of cooperation structures is in place. The 'mapshot' (see Map 2) provides a simplified overview of the regional governance setting:

- The trinational Eurodistrict Basel (TEB) is a trilateral cooperation format at the local level in a rather concentrated way: on the French side, it includes St. Louis (but not Mulhouse); on the German side, Lörrach is included (but not Freiburg). A Eurodistrict format is similar to cooperation formats that are called Euregio or Euroregio etc. in other border contexts, involving in particular the municipal and district level.
- The Agglo Basel has a similar perimeter. The 'Agglo format' refers to the Swiss Agglomeration programmes, an important tool of Swiss spatial development policies (ARE 2023). The exact perimeters of agglomeration programmes are regularly updated on the basis of Swiss data on incoming commuters. Against this background, the cross-border agglomeration programmes can be seen as a Swiss way of identifying cross-border functional areas. A key function of Agglo programmes is the organisation of funds for transport infrastructure and spatial development. This tool is certainly an exception at the European level: domestic funds are organised in a way that allows for investments on the other side of a border (if significant benefit is to be expected for Switzerland). In the Agglo Basel processes, French and German representatives are involved, even if the decision capacity lies on the Swiss side.
- The Upper Rhine Conference provides the large-scale framework of the trilateral border region. It allows for high-ranking political exchanges and agreements. It was established in 1975 and refers to a larger perimeter, pooling administrative regions.

The **territorial structure** of the TEB region is characterised by the prominence of Basel and its cross-border catchment areas. The labour market attracts high numbers of cross-border commuters, in particular due to the sectors of life sciences (Chilla & Heugel 2019). The larger area on the Swiss side receives more than 50.000 cross-border commuters daily (Basler Zeitung 2024). Moreover, Basel and the TEB region is a hub in the transport system. Several transport axes meet here, including the two major north-south axes of the western and eastern side of the Rhine. The modes of rail, road, and waterway come together in this region, resulting in one of the major European infrastructure nodes. Although substantial progress has been made in transport-related development, aligning infrastructure capacities with the evolving socio-economic dynamics continues to pose a complex challenge

A series of towns and rural areas complement the polycentric picture. The region is embedded within the mid-mountain landscapes around the Rhine Valley.

Map 2 // Mapshot (own elaboration)



Political boundaries

— National border

Settlement system

● Metropolis
○ Regional centre
● Local node

Mobility infrastructure

== Road (first tier)
— Road (second tier)
- - - Rail (first tier)
- · - · Rail (second tier)

Territorial character

■ Cities
■ Towns and suburbs
■ Rural areas

Natural features

— River
— Tributary river
■ Waterbody

Functional cross-border zones¹



Cross-border cooperation formats

■ Oberreihekonferenz/
Conférence du Rhin Supérieur
■ Agglo Basel
■ Trinationaler Eurodistrict Basel TEB
/Eurodistrict Trinationale de Bâle ETB

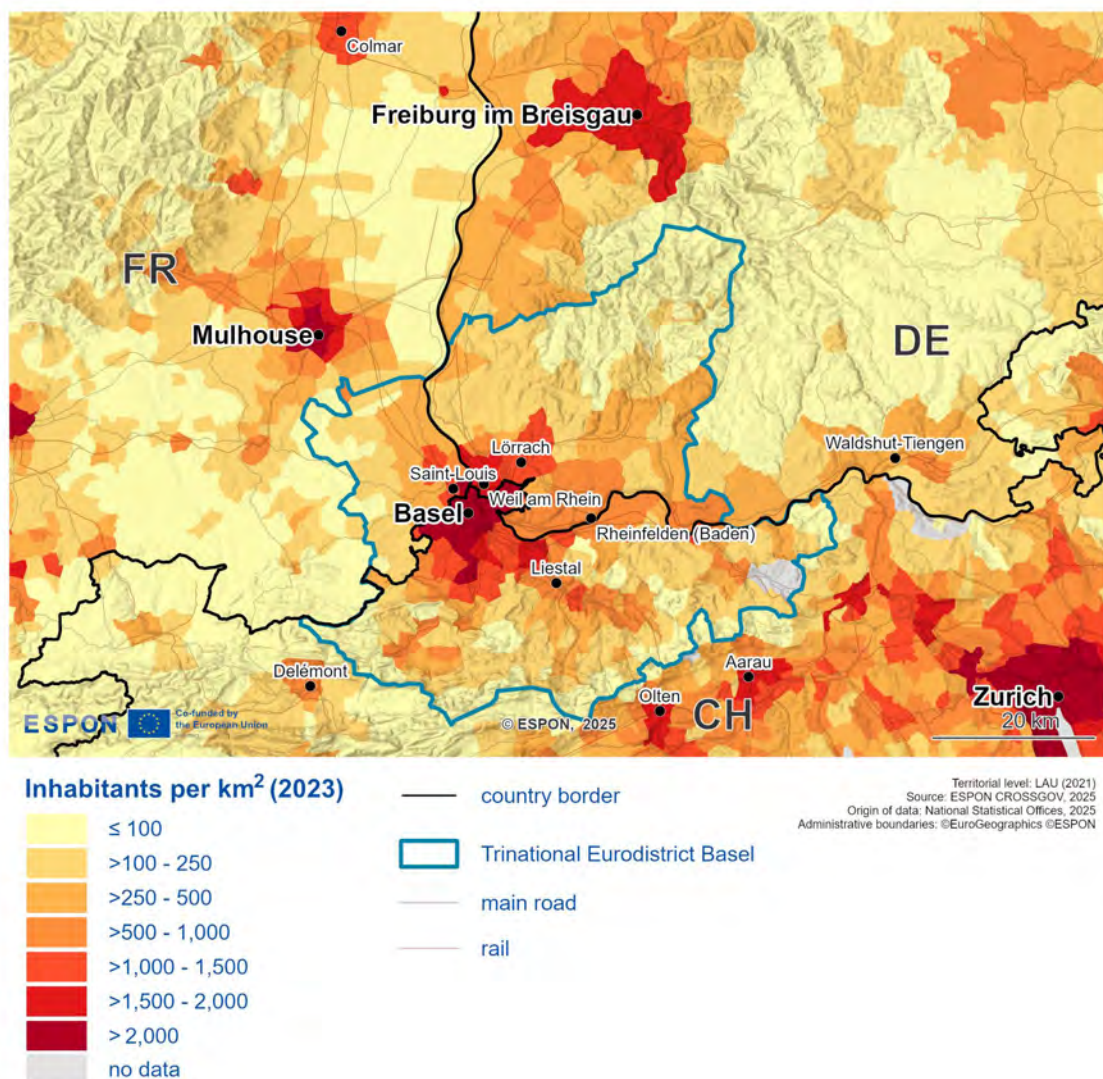
¹ The functional cross-border zones describe those areas where cross-border flows and functions are considered to be most prominent. This simplified geometry is based on expert assessment and document analyses. The fine scale concretisation of cross-border functional areas (CBFA) was implemented later in the CROSSGOV project at the European scale.

3 Multi-sectoral analysis of the cross-border region

3.1 Territorial analysis

The Basel metropolitan area, spanning parts of Switzerland, Germany and France, is one of Europe's best-known examples of cross-border functional integration. It is characterised by interlinkages across multiple sectors. One of the most significant flows is the cross-border labour market, with people commuting from France and Germany to work in Basel. Meanwhile, it is common for people to shop on the German side. In general, differences in cost of living and labour markets are taken advantage of. Against this backdrop, the current setting of the Basel metropolitan area will be examined.

Map 3 // Population density

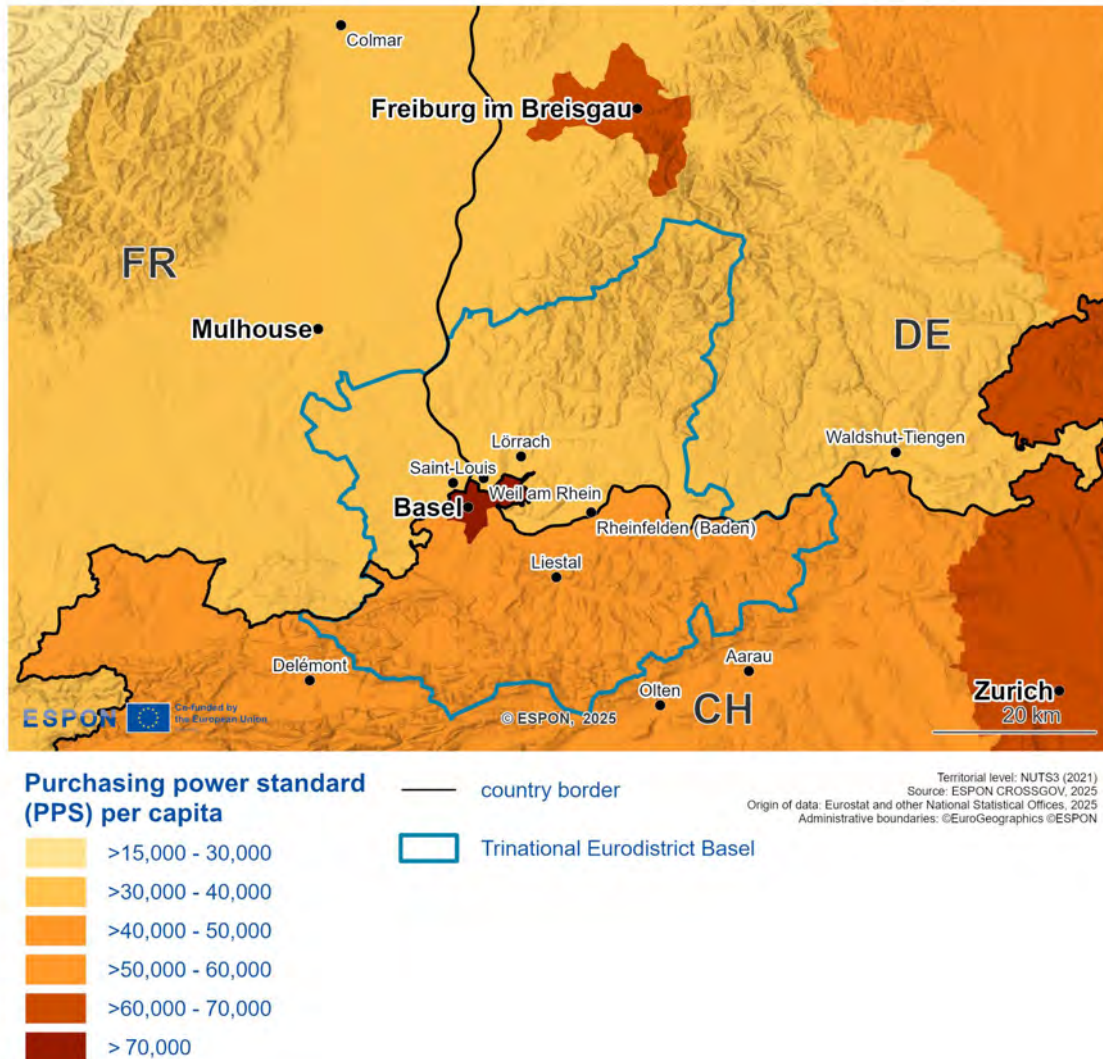


Map 3 shows the population density at municipal level for the southern Upper Rhine region. At its centre lies the city of Basel, exceeding 2,000 inhabitants per square kilometre. Many neighbouring municipalities also have a high population density as part of this conurbation. However, these communities are not confined to Switzerland but also extend to France and Germany, including communities such as Huningue (FR), Saint-Louis (FR), Weil am Rhein (DE) and Lörrach (DE). As a result, these are 'urbanised borders', which are no longer recognisable in terms of population density. A fairly

high population density is observed across almost the entire TEB region. Other urban centres along the Upper Rhine are Mulhouse, Colmar and Freiburg.

As previously mentioned, the economy is a key driver of the development of the Basel cross-border functional area. As shown in Map 4, Basel functions as an economic centre within the context of Switzerland's comparatively high gross domestic product (GDP) values per inhabitant. Since the neighbouring French and German territories do not achieve comparable levels, significant differentials within the trilateral border region drive cross-border dynamics.

Map 4 // GDP at current market prices (2024)

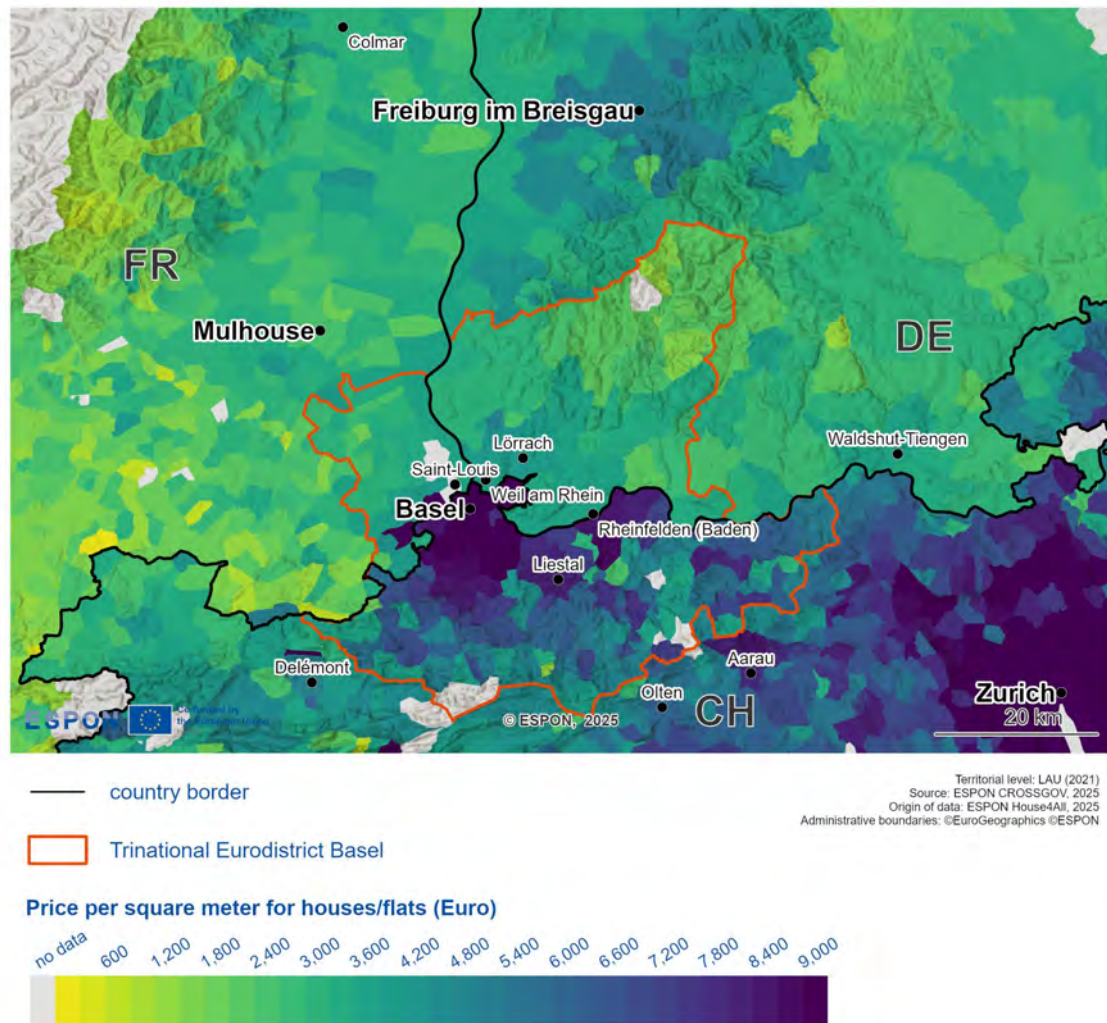


A similar spatial pattern can be seen in the advertised purchase price per square metre of flats and apartments in 2024/25 (see Map 5). The purchasing price is also particularly high in Switzerland, especially in urban areas. In many municipalities within the Swiss TEB area, it exceeds €9,000 per square metre. The price difference of around €4,000 between Switzerland and its neighbouring countries, Germany and France, is another driving force behind spatial integration: The main factor for cross-border commuting is certainly the relative attractiveness of the Swiss labour market. This factor is intensified by the relative appeal of the real estate market on the French and German side of the borders. Commuting allows to combine these two kinds of differentials.

Notably, there is no evident spillover effect on housing prices in the German and French communities in the immediate vicinity of Basel. This also applies to suburban Saint Louis (FR) with a median sales price of around €2,500 per square metre over the last 12 months (Immobilier.notaires.fr 2025). Two notable exceptions are Hégenheim and Hagenthal-le-Bas on the French side, right next to the Swiss border, where housing prices are in the Swiss price range. In general, Housing policy was identified as

a relevant topic for the future in the expert interviews, although it was emphasised that it is a less significant issue than in other major Swiss cities, such as Zurich and Geneva.

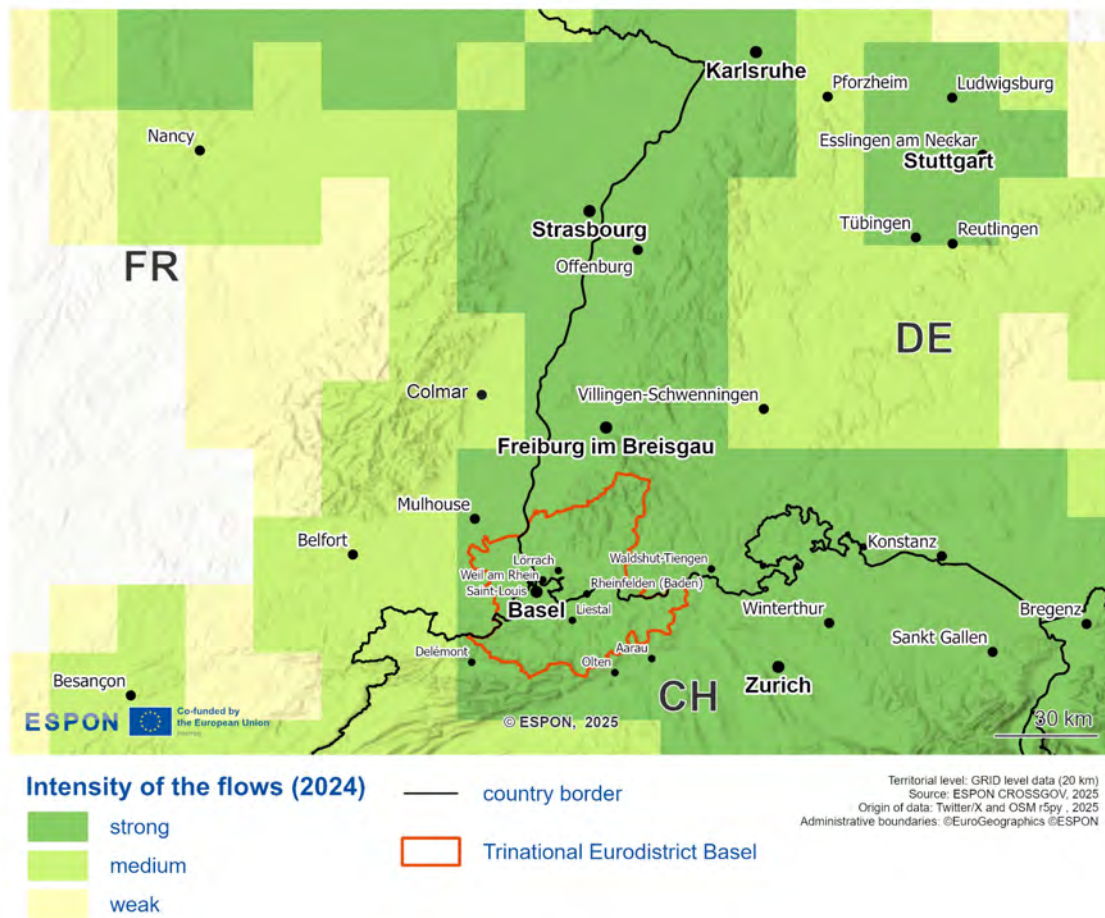
Map 5 // Real estate market – Advertised sales price (2024-2025)



In addition to static spatial data, it is important to consider flow data when focusing on functional cross-border areas. Based on data from Twitter/X² of digital footprints of individual users, the intensity of physical movement of people across borders is strong along the Upper Rhine. Colmar (FR) is the only city that is less strongly interconnected. This indicator supports the argument that a functional cross-border area can be identified within the spatial framework of the Trinational Eurodistrict Basel, as indicated by the significant number of cross-border movements of people illustrated in Map 6. Due to the strong cross-border interconnectedness along both the Upper and High Rhine, it is not possible to delimit the functional metropolitan area of Basel to the north and east.

² This indicator represents the extent of cross-border mobility flows in different intensity zones based on actual border crossings from Twitter users.

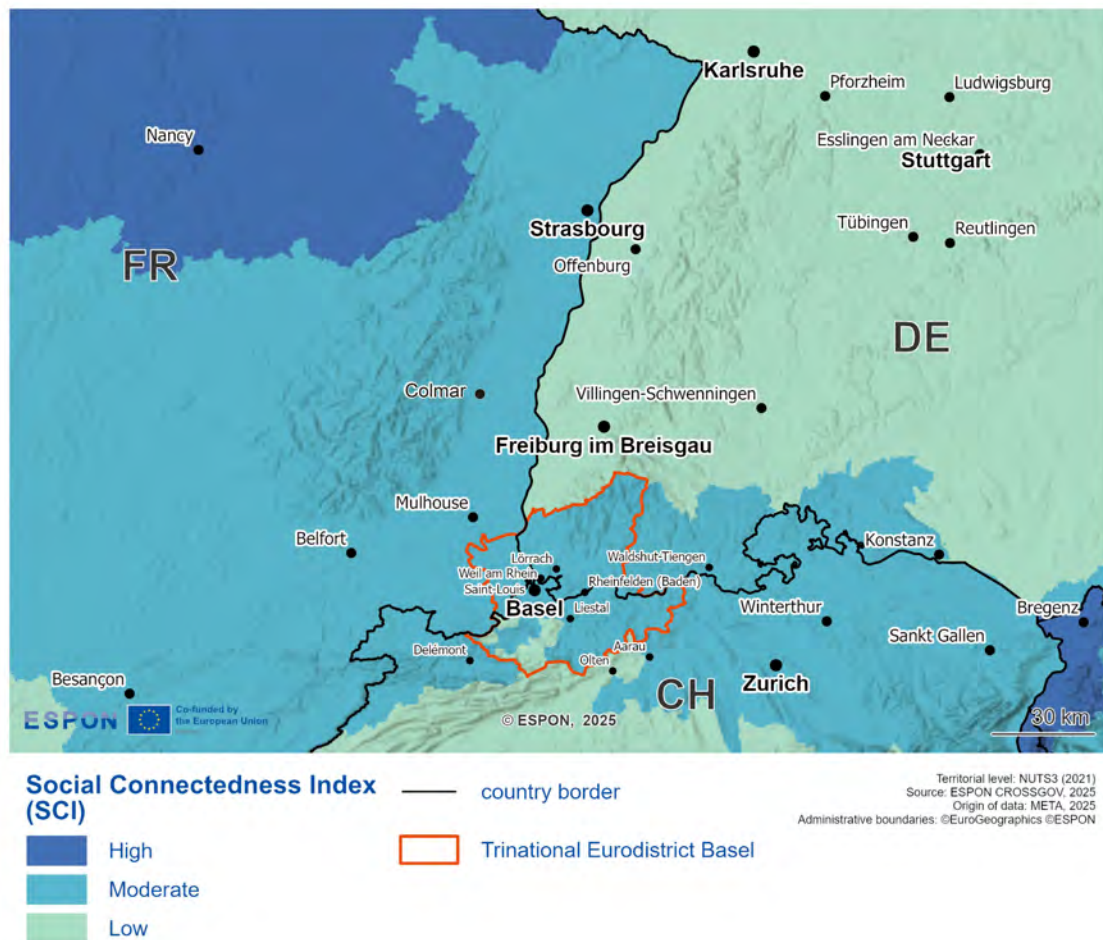
Map 6 // Cross-border catchment area based on mobility flows



To capture the social dimension of cross-border interlinkages in the Basel region, Map 7 illustrates the approach to operationalising social interaction³. The map shows the 'Social Connectedness Index (SCI)' for NUTS 3 regions regarding linkages to regions in proximity compared to all other international linkages. The index represents the strength of these connections. While Basel often plays a pivotal role in Europe with regard to cross-border integration, this indicator, based on Facebook friendships with people living nearby on the other side of the border, implies that social connectivity is generally moderate. It applies to all three respective countries. However, this finding can be relativized as it is based on data from Facebook, that has not the same popularity in all regions and generations. For example, the map shows that the French part of the Greater Region and the Austrian part of the Alpine Rhine Valley have higher values in Facebook related social connectivity. This must not hide the fact that cultural activities and social society dynamics have a strong cross-border dimension in the Basel region. A multiplicity of projects is organised by both the Upper Rhine '[civil society pillar](#)' and the [TEB](#), focusing on civil society. Cross-border movements are not restricted to working and living, but also are prominent in shopping (price differentials) and leisure activities.

³ This indicator is based on social cross-border connections of Facebook users. The so called 'Social Connectedness Index (SCI)' represents Facebook friendship connections between users living on opposite sides of borders of any country within a 300-kilometre distance.

Map 7 // Cross-border connectivity in social media



3.2 Governance analysis

The **overall governance setting** in the region has to address a high complexity: the region a) features a tri-lateral setting, b) involves the non-EU-member state Switzerland and c) has a high degree of functional integration in an urbanised setting. Against this background, border related governance is much higher on the agenda than in many other border regions. And indeed, the governance setting of the Upper Rhine in general and the TEB region in particular is characterised by an impressive range of cooperation formats (see Map 8; cp. Turner et al. 2022). This kind of 'institutional thickness' comes along with a division of labour amongst the involved cooperation formats. As introduced earlier, the TEB supports cooperation at the level of municipalities and districts. A key purpose is to build, foster, and ensure trust amongst the multiplicity of actors on either side of the border(s). The Upper Rhine perimeter comprises four Eurodistricts (Eurodistrict Pamina, Eurodistrict Strasbourg-Ortenau, Eurodistrict Region Freiburg-Centre et Sud Alsace, Trinational Eurodistrict Basel) in total, with the TEB in the south. The Agglo Basel is focussed on the organisation of infrastructure investment. As one of the of Swiss agglomeration programmes, it can act rather efficiently and implementation oriented. Currently, 34 agglomeration programmes are in place of which many are located at the national borders. Some are organized in a cross-border manner, due to the high cross-border integration (Geneva, Neuchâtel Urban Network, Rhine Valley/Lake Constance – and Basel). As all agglomeration programmes, the Agglo Basel is regularly updated by means of commuting data – aiming at the development of functional areas. So even if the perimeter of TEB and Agglo are very similar, the logic behind their setup is very different and complementary. The Upper Rhine conference with its much larger perimeter provides a political and institutional framework at a higher level. It provides the framework for cooperation between cities, universities and firms, the development of interregional

transport (e.g. airports) etc. Very much linked to the Upper Rhine conference is the Trinational Metropolitan Region of the Upper Rhine, addressing socio-economic development in different thematic pillars.

Map 8 // Cross-border governance structures

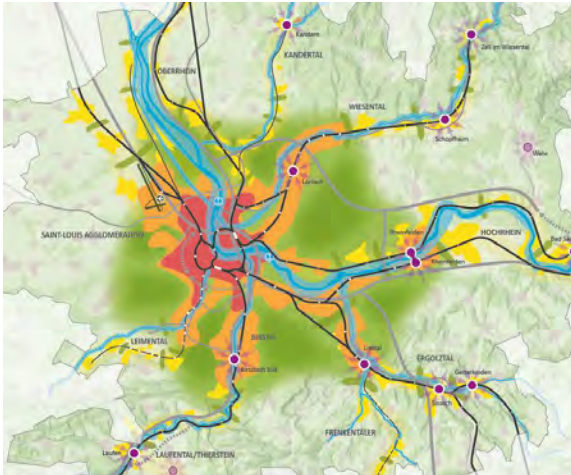


The cross-border cooperation dynamic in the region is currently high in the field of spatial planning and development: Both the Upper Rhine Conference as well as the Agglomeration Basel have elaborated a spatial development document (see Map 9). The Upper Rhine process has only recently been finalised, and the interlinkages between the two perspectives are not yet discussed in detail.

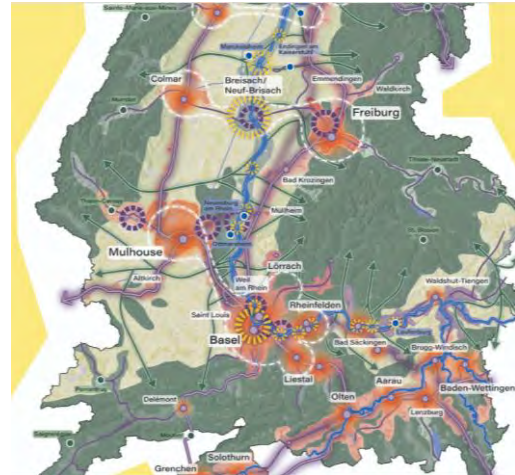
In both processes, the TEB has been involved but was not the key actor. In the Agglo case, the process is driven by Swiss actors that have the mandate for the Agglomeration programme and its resources. The Upper Rhine Development Concept is based on a cooperation of regional planners that are affiliated to institutions 'above' the TEB level.

The agglomeration programme is implemented via a clear investment programme. The next (fifth) generation of agglomeration programmes is about to start and continue this instrumental process. For the Upper Rhine concept, the situation is less clear. The options of implementation are currently developed.

Map 9 // Future concepts



Map (left): extract from Zukunftsbeeld Basel 2040 (Aggloprogramm Basel 2025)



Map (right): extract from the Spatial Development Concept of the Upper Rhine (Deutsch-Französisch-Schweizerische Oberrheinkonferenz/Conference Franco-Germano-Suisse du Rhin Supérieur 2024)

This situation is remarkable, as spatial planning and development tend to be sensitive topics in border regions. In many regions, not even joint maps are available in these fields. The sensitivity is due to two reasons: Firstly, there is a high sensitivity for subsidiarity in the planning. Even if cross-border spatial development debates rarely ever question domestic mandates, there tend to be concerns of interference with domestic mandates of municipalities, districts or regions. Secondly, the complexity of the matter is high. Definitions (e.g. of what a city is) and categories (e.g. of what centrality means) often differ largely across the involved territories, and so do the cartographic representations. Joint spatial development and planning documents and processes, thus, need good processes of exchange, alignment, and communication. Currently, flagship projects play an important role both at the trilateral as well as the bilateral level:

- The [3Land project](#) developing a cross-border urban district between Basel (CH), Weil am Rhein (DE), Huningue (FR) and Saint-Louis (FR).
- The [Arealentwicklung über Grenzen hinweg](#) developing a cross-border residential area between Basel (CH) and Weil am Rhein (DE).

Summarising the situation, the **strengths of the current governance system** lie in particular in the longstanding experience in cross-border cooperation that includes all administrative levels and all sectoral fields. The multiplicity of cooperation formats and the high number of actors and institutions result in a comparably large community, of experts in border-related issues. Thus, the levels of trust and expertise are high. Against this background, the further development of governance can follow for an incremental path, i.e. building on existing structures and addressing specific issues.

This 'institutional thickness' of the setting comes along with new **challenges of the governance setting**. The dynamic development of governance involves huge efforts for the involved actors. For example, the formulation of strategic documents and the establishment of working groups is an important task in large scale cooperation formats as the Upper Rhine Conference or the [Franco-German Cross-Border Cooperation Committee](#). For the smaller cooperation formats like the TEB and other Eurodistricts, this leads to questions of resources. There are concerns that an increasing complexity of governance structures, with high numbers of sub-groups, might make it challenging for smaller institutions to operate within, potentially reducing their relevance.

In general, it is not easy to define concrete challenges and hindering factors to efficient governance, as the ESPON CROSSGOV approach aims to identify. The dynamics of a tri-lateral constellation with high socio-economic differentials must be seen as continuous challenge. Keeping pace with addressing infrastructure bottlenecks is amongst the most urgent topics. Also, the involvement of Switzerland as a non-EU member remains an issue. Nevertheless, the current system has to be seen as a comparably mature setting that allows for incremental bottom-up procedures. Recent years have brought continuous learning processes and improvements. Further developing this incremental process seems to be an adequate approach.

4 Future perspectives and potential recommendations

Developing functional perspectives of the TEB region is a complex endeavour. There is a clear consensus, that it is important to keep the overall high level of prosperity and socio-economic functioning. This also means to balance the development of infrastructure with the sustainability aims. The following quote of the [TEB strategy towards 2030](#) (2022a) illustrates this: “The Trinational Eurodistrict Basel is an attractive, sustainable living and economic area with a lively civic exchange that is developing in a future-oriented way.”

At the same time, it is not easy to formulate consensual and concrete policy objectives. On either side of the border, the increase in numbers of cross-border commuters can be seen as a more positive or a more critical trend; the same is true for settlement enlargement, infrastructure investments etc. The high degree of cross-border integration leads to a situation where policy debates start be comparable to purely domestic inner-state debates where manifold positions have to be negotiated.

As indicated earlier, the governance related discussions in the TEB / Upper Rhine region are different than in many other European border regions: whereas other border regions discuss how cross-border cooperation can be institutionalised, this region has already a series of well-established working bodies at different spatial levels. The question is rather on how to be effective and efficient within the complex environment, and how to develop them further. In a way, these discussions can be seen as ‘next-level-perspective’. Main **future perspectives** can be summarised in the following two strands.

a) Instrumental perspective

For the TEB as a cooperation format at the local level, and being in the center of trilateral integration dynamics, resource questions are highly relevant. The budgetary and staff resources are limited in scope and often in time. That means that engagement with other cooperation formats and their thematic working groups has to be focussed in a clear way. In recent years, the activities in the multi-level governance system have requested increasing engagement, e.g. with the institutionalisation of the Treaty of Aachen. A clear ex-ante planning of adequate resources in an important requirement.

The mission of cross-border cooperation formats lies in the fields of networking, communication, and trust building. This is important in order to link the ‘community’ of experts on border related issues on either side of the border. However, the link to the political sphere is subject to fluctuations. Though political representatives are always formally involved in border related governance formats, this does not automatically mean that domestic political decision-making processes take into account border related interests.

Cross-border development is a key question in this region, asking for the development of instruments. Addressing the high dynamic in the tri-lateral border region means to constantly work on governance formats and their scope. This is also true as the Swiss part of the region is formally not part of the EU. Here, instruments as the EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation) and the recent format of EU BRIDGEforEU certainly have their potential, but cannot respond to all challenges.

Concerning **potential thematic areas of cooperation**, the focus is very broad and shows a certain dynamic over time. The setting is very advanced and currently works on the fields of transport, health, the environment, civil society and tourism and [others more](#). This has to be put into relation with the Agglo programme providing resources for direct infrastructure in the transport field. The INTERREG Upper Rhine programme is an important source of funding for cooperation issues, even if it does not allow for material investment. Nevertheless, it remains a challenge to manage spatial dynamics and bottlenecks in transport infrastructure in due time. With the aim of sustainability, multi-modal structures have to pave the way towards decarbonization.

The continuous investment is, amongst others, foreseen with the next generation of the Agglo programme. The alignment of the spatial development strategy of the Upper Rhine Conference with other documents is a task for the coming years.

Even if the availability of fine spatial data in this region is much better than in most other border regions, it remains an issue. Cross-border working groups, projects, processes are installed to further improve the situation.

The testing of experimentation zones (cmp. Frey & Müller 2023) is an idea that was discussed during the workshop: in defined areas, the misfit of domestic regulations could be overcome. This concept can address very different levels. It can address rather technical specifications e.g. in cross-border public transport and can also address special taxation areas (e.g. cross-border industrial park). Such an economic integration zone across borders could help to reduce the border related increase of mobility needs.

b) Spatial perspective

In a region of so manifold cross-border integration dynamics, as it is the case in the TEB region, it is not possible to define the one and final cooperation perimeter that would fit all sectoral questions. Both local cooperation formats, the TEB and the Agglo, are in principle open to perimeter modifications. As mentioned earlier, the Agglo perimeter is mainly based on current commuting data. The reasoning behind is that Swiss agglomeration policy takes a certain responsibility to ensure an appropriate commuting infrastructure.

Also, in the framework of the TEB, enlargements and memberships are re-discussed from time to time. This is mainly a matter of local politics, where a fit of thematic priorities, specific projects and personal relations and trust come into play. Summarising the situation, the TEB logic of delineation results from a political process, whereas the Agglo approach is a rather functional one, mainly based on commuting patterns.

In both cases, the 'soft-spaces-approach' is underlying (Allmendinger et al. 2014): The cooperation perimeter is handled in a rather flexible manner that allows to react to functional dynamics and political debates over time. Such a 'soft space' is managed in the 'shadow' of stable domestic territories and mandates that allow for the structured organisation of resources and legitimacy. that refers to de-facto situations and that – at the same time - allows for a certain flexibility over time.

The question remains what are the long-term perspectives of the TEB region. Having seen the dynamics of the recent decade, it becomes difficult to define clear scenarios. Nevertheless, some general arguments can be defined:

- The **positive scenario** for the coming 10 years would mean to reach the goals formulated in the strategic documents of the TEB and related governance formats. The overall aim is to maintain the overall good cross-border functioning and the overall prosperity whilst addressing bottlenecks in infrastructure and shortcomings in sustainability. With regard to the governance setting, the objective is to be effective with regard to implementation without having a centralisation at just one political level. Testing new governance formats like experimentation zones might lead to the next level of cross-border integration. To be more concrete, keeping the dynamic of an incremental learning process is (already) a positive scenario.
- The **negative scenario** is – simply said – the opposite setting. The socio-economic development might be hampered, leading to conflicts disparities on either sides of the borders. Infrastructure settings can become overburdened, and governance structures put into question.

As the tri-lateral border region of TEB is amongst the most experienced border regions worldwide, and as this region has shown a continuous 'learning curve' also over recent years, the potentials of the positive scenario seem to be promising.

Challenge		Response			
Description	Type (present/future)	Solutions for regional and governance policies (e.g. change of laws and regulations, establishment of new services or institutions, financial constructions)	Relevant sectors (e.g. healthcare, transport, tourism, labour mobility, multisectoral/overall)	Territorial level of the solutions (local, microregional, regional, national, cross-border, macroregional/transnational covering more than two countries, EU level)	Related good practices in Europe
Efficiency & effectiveness of governance structures	present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • appropriate resources • focus engagement at the level of working groups and bodies • ensure political support 	All	All	Greater region (around Luxembourg), Greater Geneva
Transport infrastructure improvement	present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue / foster of already strong efforts of investment • governance structures • cross-border experimentation zones 	transport, spatial planning / development	Domestic: Regional, local, national Cross-border level	Greater region (around Luxembourg), cross-border cases of the Swiss agglomeration programmes
Spatial development strategies' alignment	present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implementation / alignment processes between existing processes and documents (in particular Upper Rhine / Agglo) 	spatial planning / development	Domestic: Regional, local, national Cross-border level	Greater region (around Luxembourg)

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ESPON 2030

ESPON EGTC
11 Avenue John F. Kennedy
L-1855 Luxembourg
Grand Duchy of Luxembourg
Phone: +352 20 600 280
Email: info@espon.eu
www.espon.eu

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