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# Regional approaches to cross-border integration: the cases of Saarland and Brandenburg

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## ABSTRACT

Regional cross-border strategies represent a recent and under-researched approach to shaping cross-border integration from below. Drawing on Sohn's framework of cross-border integration as a *geo-economic model* or a *territorial project*, this paper examines the content and development of cross-border strategies in two German states: Saarland and Brandenburg. Based on the attempt to sharpen the profile of the Franco-Saarland region, and as a strategy focusing on language, culture and identity, the Saarland strategy strives for cross-border integration in the sense of a territorial project. In contrast, in the Brandenburg strategy, we identify more elements of a geo-economic model, since it focuses on cross-border infrastructure and services to improve the quality of life. Meanwhile, both strategies contain hybrid elements, showing the complex and multifaceted nature of border regions. Using actor-centred institutionalism and insights from the border studies literature, the study highlights how economic, sociocultural and political contexts shaped the policy processes leading up to the strategies and their particular profiles.

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*Brandenburg-Polen*

## 1. Introduction

In times of a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2005, p. 426) towards European integration and rising levels of Euroscepticism (De Vries, 2018), recent studies have highlighted the role of integration from below – more specifically the integration in cross-border regions (CBRs) (Beck, 2022; Setti, 2025; Wassenberg, 2018). In those regions, the remaining differences between European Union (EU) states are particularly tangible, for example when administrative and legal disparities complicate life for cross-border commuters, or when divergent healthcare systems prevent patients from receiving treatment on the other side of the border (Medeiros, 2018; Svensson & Balogh, 2018). Therefore, integration in CBRs presents an important horizontal dimension of European integration which is of particular relevance for people's everyday lives (Beck, 2022).

Researchers of cross-border integration (CBI) have been examining different dimensions, such as networks between local politicians (Svensson & Nordlund, 2015), attitudes of citizens in CBRs (Rehm et al., 2025) or have employed composite measures based on, i.e., cross-border projects and institutions (Durand & Decoville, 2020; Setti, 2025). Yet, a hitherto under studied but important phenomenon and contribution to CBI is the growing engagement of the regional political level in this integration process. In this regard, multiple German states have adopted strategy papers that lay out the goals of regional cross-border policies. Among these are, for example, the French strategy (*Frankreichstrategie*) of the Saarland, the Benelux strategy of North Rhine-Westphalia, the neighbourhood strategy of Brandenburg (*Nachbarschaftsstrategie Brandenburg-Polen*) and the French conception of Baden-Württemberg. These strategy papers signal a proactive stance by regional governments and reflect the politicisation and regionalisation of CBI. Analysing them allows for a better understanding of how regional actors frame cross-border challenges and opportunities, and how they seek to influence future collaboration with neighbouring territories.

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This is particularly relevant, given that much of the literature on multi-level governance has actually started from the observation of subnational regions as drivers of European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 1996; Loughlin, 1996). The adoptions of strategy papers hark back to one of the key issues of European integration literature from 30 years ago, namely the construction of European integration from below with regional actors, such as state governments, becoming important agents in a developing system of multi-level governance (e.g., Bartolini, 2004).

Against this background, the question arises which goals these strategies actually pursue and how they compare against each other, how their development can be explained and which function they fulfil for the respective (cross-border) regions and for European (cross-border) integration. Therefore, the current paper sets out, 1) to systematically compare the content of two exemplary strategies and 2) to analyse how the specific shape of these strategies, and the differences between them, can be explained through the respective policy process.

To do so, we selected two rather different cases: The French strategy of the Saarland (adopted in 2014 among the first state-level strategies) and the neighbourhood strategy of Brandenburg (adopted a few years later in 2021). We chose Saarland and Brandenburg because of their strongly differing contexts in which CBI occurs. Developed in a *Land* with a moved geopolitical history, the Saarland strategy can build on close and long-standing ties to France as its neighbouring country. Territorial shifts and the alternating affiliation to France and Germany have left cultural imprints. After both World Wars, Saarland was placed under foreign administration, economically linked to France, and influenced by its culture (Sicks, 2023). Even after reunification of the Saarland with West-Germany in 1957, Saarland maintained strong economic ties with France, fostering cooperation through institutional frameworks like the Greater Region Summit (Wille, 2011). In stark contrast, Polish influence in Brandenburg is more limited and the region can look back at a much shorter history of cooperation and exchange. Brandenburg-Polish relations were shaped by the Second World War, post-war border shifts and limited cross-border movements and cooperation in the Cold War Era (Opilowska, 2022). The 1991 German-Polish Neighbourhood Treaty initiated a policy of convergence and reconciliation. Since Poland joined the EU in 2004, cooperation has been largely shaped by the Interreg programmes and much less institutionalised than along the border between France and Germany. As has been shown, timing, depth of cooperation and cultural influences differ significantly in the two border regions. Drawing on this variance enables us to study how far these factors have had an impact on strategy formulation.

We deliver our analysis in five steps: First, to conceptually grasp the role of the state strategies, we theoretically locate them in the literature on CBI (Section 2). Second, to answer our first research question, we present the results of a systematic qualitative content analysis of the two strategies to describe the contents and differences between the strategies (Section 3). Third, we introduce actor-centred institutionalism (ACI) (Scharpf, 1997) and adapt it to the specific border context to inform our second empirical analysis (Section 4) and, to answer the second research question, we analyse the policy process that led to the adoption of each of the strategies. Drawing on process tracing based on document analysis and expert interviews, we show how the shape of the strategies can be explained. We finish our paper with a discussion of our findings and an outlook for possible future research.

## 2. CBRs as spaces of horizontal integration

Actors in European CBRs have a long-standing history of collaboration across various policy domains, contributing to the formation of institutional, political and social realities in cross-border regions in context-specific ways. The dynamics of these regions are oftentimes understood in terms of varying levels and forms of CBRs and CBI. In particular, cross-border cooperation (CBC) can be understood as ‘political projects carried out by private, state and, to an extent, third sector actors with the express goal of extracting benefit from joint initiatives in various economic, social, environmental and political fields’ (Scott, 2015, p. 33). Over the years, CBC has been institutionally and financially strengthened by the EU, for example through the community initiative Interreg (Reitel et al., 2018) and through the introduction of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) (Chilla et al., 2017; Krzymuski & Ulrich, 2019). Oftentimes, CBC is carried out in Euroregions or Eurodistricts which provide the geographical scope of cooperation (Pupier, 2019).

Both as a conceptual perspective and as an empirical dynamic, authors have further referred to processes of CBI. Research has noted early on that CBC in many regions exceeds mere situational and piecemeal collaboration in single policy fields, but instead encompasses a long-term perspective based on a wide array of cooperation areas as well as cross-border institutionalisation processes (Blatter, 2000; Perkmann, 2007). In this vein, highly institutionalised CBRs like the Upper Rhine region at the Franco-German-Swiss border have shifted their focus from cooperation on certain local issues to encompass a larger vision of the region as a model for European integration (Wassenberg, 2021). This horizontal contribution to European integration can present an ‘increasingly attractive perspective’ (Beck, 2022, p. 252) as the overall process of European integration is becoming more difficult and more differentiated.

Recently, these integration dynamics in CBRs have been defined ‘as the process whereby citizens and political authorities of border regions shift their loyalties, expectations, and (political) activities toward a new level, namely the cross-border level’ (Setti, 2025). According to this understanding, CBI encompasses three dimensions, namely the economic, social and political dimension which relate to flows of goods and people, ties between citizens in the cross-border area and the institutional set-up of the CBR (Setti, 2025). Similar conceptualisations have been brought forward in previous works (Durand & Decoville, 2020; Sohn, 2014; van Houtum, 2000).

Importantly, CBI is an open and dynamic process which is influenced by various factors such as functional pressures, regional identity, political or institutional context and path dependencies (Setti, 2025; Sohn, 2014; Wassenberg, 2018). According to Sohn (2014, p. 593), there is ‘no unique path for cross-border regional integration, only different dynamics and strategies strongly influenced by the geo-economic, political and historical contexts in play’. In this vein, CBI can be seen as the result of strategic behaviour of political actors who seize the opportunities present in specific border contexts in order to pursue their own interests. In this sense, borders can serve as objects of place-making strategies which reinforce the international and multicultural character of a region and, in turn, can upgrade the region’s status in global competition and attract international business (Sohn, 2014).

Further following the author’s conceptualisation, CBI can result in two ideal-types of border regions; the *geo-economic model* and the *territorial project*. These models present contrasting approaches to regional cooperation by emphasising different priorities and outcomes, as displayed in Table 1. The geo-economic model focuses on value capture which results from exploiting the differential benefits provided by borders. It emphasises economic interactions that arise from asymmetrical relations between regions on either side of the border. Cooperation in other areas, according to this ideal-type, primarily serves purely instrumental purposes. For example, integrated transport infrastructure can support the mobility of cross-border workers. In contrast, the territorial project aims to foster a sense of shared identity and place-making across the border. It is based on mutual understanding and trust among actors and addresses a societal integration, for example, through initiatives related to culture, language and arts. While in this ideal type, economic incentives do play a role and are realised, for example, through territorial marketing strategies, it goes beyond purely functional aspects but instead encompasses a transcendence of the border and cohesion of the CBR (Sohn, 2014).

Against this background, we understand CBI both as a conceptual perspective and an empirical trend. As a perspective, it captures the overall development experienced in CBRs as opposed to single CBC initiatives.

**Table 1.** Ideal-types of cross-border integration.

|                                                      | “Territorial project”                                                                                                                                                                            | “Geo-economic model”                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Main objective and type of border resource mobilised | Place-making.<br>Locus of hybridisation/innovation.<br>Object of recognition.                                                                                                                    | Value capture.<br>Differential benefits (often combined with positional and transaction benefits).                                    |
| Domains concerned                                    | Culture (arts, languages, traditions, identities).<br>Spatial planning.<br>Economic positioning, territorial marketing.<br>Knowledge-intensive activities.<br>Cross-border residential mobility. | Labour market.<br>Export-processing factories and low-wage manufacturing.<br>Residential market.<br>Commerce and services (shopping). |
| Purpose of cross-border cooperation                  | Identity-providing (gaining public awareness and mobilisation, building a shared spatial imaginary, a common territorial identity).                                                              | Instrumental (enhancing utility, reducing uncertainties, solving problems, regulating negative externalities).                        |

Source: adapted from Sohn (2014, 598, excerpts from original table).

As an empirical dynamic, the term captures the observed movement towards increased collaboration in CBRs in different dimensions, such as flows of goods and people, cross-border institutions and shifted political loyalties and activities. In this vein, the Brandenburg and the Saarland strategy can be seen as both expression of and contribution to increased CBI. Due to their highly public and performative nature, they are not merely proposals for CBC projects but, arguing with Setti (2025), they can be seen as a shift of regional authorities' activities to the cross-border level.

However, it is yet unclear what their contents actually are and how far they can be related to the ideal-types of CBI outlined above. Therefore, we will use the upcoming section to introduce an in-depth analysis of the strategy papers and, in a next step, we will trace the development process of the strategies and elaborate how the differences between them can be explained.

### 3. The Saarland strategy and the Brandenburg strategy in comparison

The first analytical step of this article consists of providing a systematic analysis of the two strategy documents under review – the 'Eckpunktepapier einer Frankreichstrategie' (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014) of Saarland (subsequently 'Saarland strategy') and the 'Strategie des Landes Brandenburg für die nachbarschaftliche Zusammenarbeit im deutsch-polnischen Verflechtungsraum' (Land Brandenburg, 2021)<sup>1</sup> of Brandenburg (subsequently 'Brandenburg strategy'). While especially the Saarland strategy has gained some academic traction, covering the acceptance rates of the strategy among the population (Krämer, 2019), its influence on multilevel cross-border governance (Crossey & Weber, 2023) and zooming in on single thematic aspects of the strategy from an interdisciplinary perspective (Lüsebrink et al., 2017), a coherent and systematic analysis of the strategies – especially in a comparative manner – is missing, so far.

Building on the framework by Sohn (2014) introduced above, we fill this gap by analysing the content of the strategy documents regarding specific *policy domains*, such as education or law and order and *objectives of CBC*, both concerning concrete goals and abstract aims such as the construction of a public CBR image. Methodologically, we performed a qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz (2014) and using the software MaxQDA. Given the exploratory character of our study, we followed an inductive coding strategy. Coding decisions were reviewed on a regular basis and categories re-shaped until a saturated coding scheme emerged which was re-applied on the data. In total, we coded 20 policy fields and seven objectives (for more information, see the Appendix in the online supplemental data). Both strategies are structured in such a way that they take stock of past CBC and then develop a strategy for future cross-border orientation. For the first category of *domains*, we coded all content addressing specific policy areas – that means also reports on previous cooperation – and for the second category of *objectives*, we coded only explicit future goals. Thus, the first category takes stock of the larger thematic profile of the overall CBC, whereas the second category explicitly captures the vision for the future CBI.

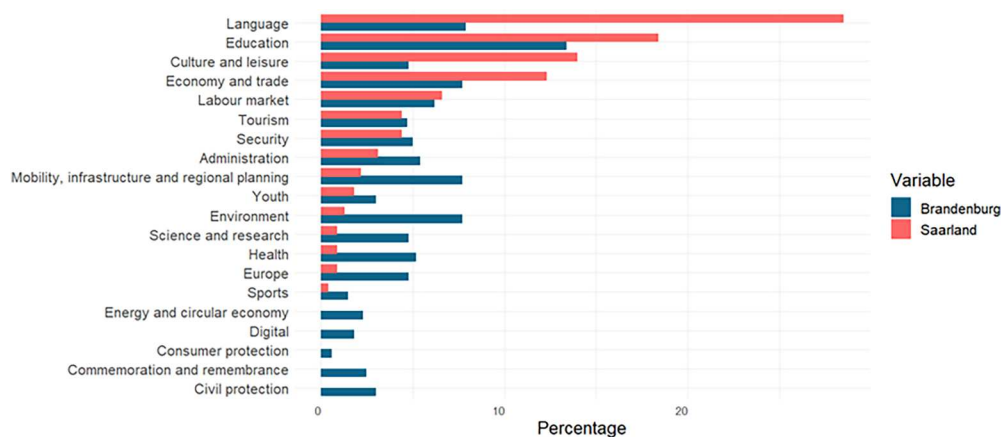
#### 3.1. Domains addressed in the strategy papers

Figure 1 provides an overview of the domains addressed in the respective strategies. As can be seen, the Saarland strategy has a rather clear profile, with almost 29% of the text referencing the topic of language and multilingualism. Despite officials stressing that it was not a pure language strategy, its focus on this issue is still evident. Coming in second and third, education as well as culture and leisure are major themes of the strategy paper. In the fourth and fifth spot, economy and trade as well as labour market issues are frequently mentioned. In contrast, other policy areas addressed in the strategy like sports events, youth and tourism take up comparatively little space.

Comparing this to the distribution of policy domains in the Brandenburg strategy, the latter is thematically much broader than the Saarland strategy. It addresses a more diverse range of domains and has a less visible focus.<sup>2</sup> Given the balanced distribution of policy areas, a breakdown by quartiles allows for a (rough) approximation of the priority topics of the Brandenburg strategy. The first quartile of policy areas includes education (13.4% of the document), language (7.9%), economy and trade (7.7%), environment (7.7%) and mobility, infrastructure and regional planning (7.7%).

To summarise, there are certain similarities concerning the strategic foci: Language and education are important topics in both CBRs; however, to a much lesser extent in the Brandenburg region. Equally,





**Figure 1.** Policy domains addressed in the strategy papers.

Source: Own calculation based on France strategy of the Saarland and neighbourhood strategy of Brandenburg.

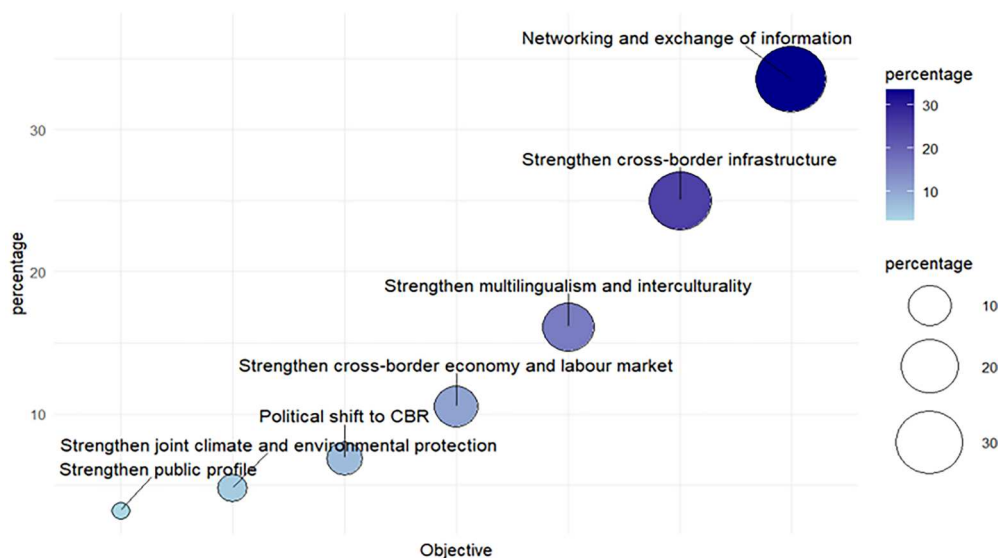
Note: Graph shows share of coded text in percent (multiple coding). 48,8% of the text for Saarland and 24,6% for Brandenburg could not be assigned to any policy area.

both strategies address the questions of economy and trade as well as the labour market. Again, it is the Saarland strategy which places a slightly stronger emphasis on these issues than the Brandenburg paper. The latter, on the other hand, has a much stronger focus on mobility and other policy domains relating to public infrastructure and management of the common territory, such as environment, administration and health.

### 3.2. Objectives of the cross-border strategies

In order to gain a better understanding of the CBR's vision that is reflected in the strategies, we analyse the objectives explicitly formulated in the documents.

The primary goal of the Brandenburg strategy (Figure 2) is to establish *encounters and improve networking and exchange of information* between Brandenburg and Polish actors (33.5% of coded passages). This includes international youth exchanges, collaboration between local administrations and best-practice sharing between tourism organisations. The overall vision is to 'jointly exploit the potential of their



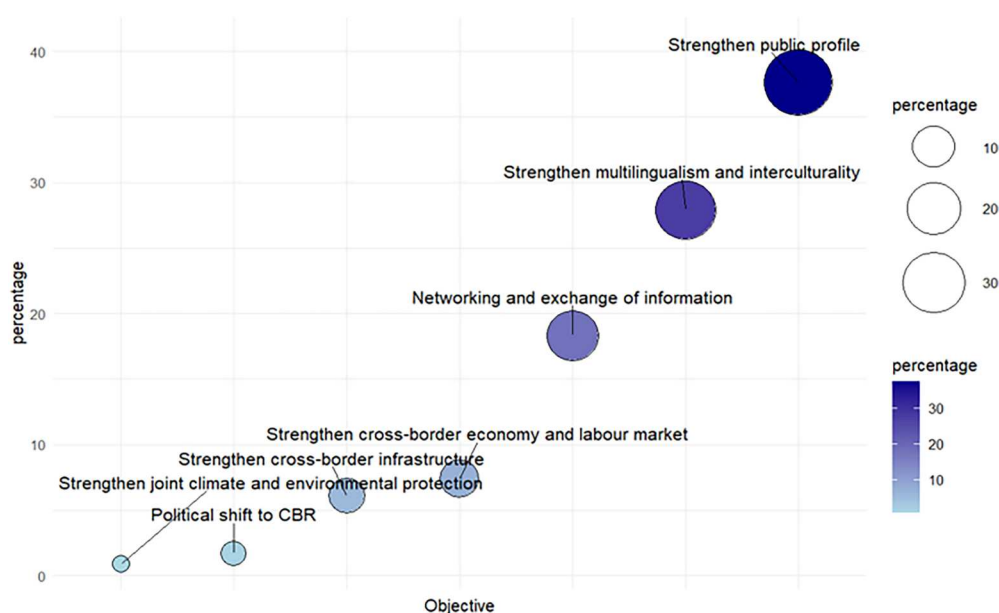
**Figure 2.** Brandenburg strategy objectives.

Source: Own calculation based on the neighbourhood strategy Brandenburg.

neighbourhood and thus try to offer their citizens the best possible living conditions' (Land Brandenburg, 2021, p. 3, own translation) in an 'interlinked region'. Functional CBC and the removal of barriers should benefit the region by enhancing its quality of life – enforced through a large number of policy-specific objectives with the expressed goal to strengthen *cross-border infrastructure and service provision* (25%). In this context, both cross-border public transport and roads and railways are improved to cope with the exchange of people and goods and the associated growing transport needs (Land Brandenburg, 2021, p. 34). Other measures following the logic of improving the quality of life through an all-encompassing functional interdependence include cross-border administrative cooperation, cross-border healthcare and cross-border civil protection. The strategy paper further promotes cross-border tourism in the region which is not only framed as leading to economic prosperity and enhancing the quality of life, but also as fostering the exchange of people across borders. The third most frequent expressed goal is the wish to strengthen *multilingualism and intercultural exchange* (16.10%). Based on the assumption that exchange and cooperation are based on mutual understanding of culture and language, 'Brandenburg pursues the goal that every interested person can participate in offers to learn Polish as a foreign language' (Land Brandenburg, 2021, p. 17, own translation). However, in terms of multilingualism, Brandenburg is far less ambitious than Saarland. For example, bilingual teachers are employed 'if necessary' (Land Brandenburg, 2021, p. 17, own translation). Besides multilingualism, the acquisition of intercultural competences, the experience of a common cultural heritage and cross-border cultural events aim to 'develop art, culture and the creative industries as catalysts for structural change and as innovative forces for identity' (Land Brandenburg, 2021, p. 19, own translation). While not as pronounced, strengthening *the common economy and labour market* is an important cornerstone set out in the strategy (10.5%). It states that 'regional differences, such as differences in wage levels or purchasing power between Brandenburg and Poland, continue to be pronounced despite certain convergences' (Land Brandenburg, 2021, p. 22, own translation). Against this background, the strategy aims to promote cross-border economic activities and minimise bureaucracy and other economic barriers. A less frequently mentioned (6.9%), but nevertheless important aspect of the strategy is the endeavour to *align the activities of the state of Brandenburg with the border region* and to include the border region as an integral part of planning. Thus, the border region is established as a scale of reference in concrete activities. This is reflected in '[d]ecisions and laws of the state government [...] [being] examined for their European and international relevance, especially with regard to Poland and the Polish partner regions' (Land Brandenburg, 2021, p. 9, own translation). Here, the character of CBI as an orientation of activities towards the border region becomes visible as a component of the strategy.

In contrast, the two most prominent objectives of the Saarland strategy are the creation of a distinct external and internal image of the *Land* and the promotion of linguistic and intercultural competences of Saarland citizens. In this vein, the Saarland is envisioned to become an 'efficient multilingual area with a Franco-German character' (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 4, own translation). As can be seen in Figure 3, the strategy is clearly designed to *create a distinct profile* of the *Land* in terms of its Franco-German expertise (31.3%). It aims to set up a unique identity for the Saarland, with France serving as its 'brand core' in the public perception. Importantly, this identity building process is supposed to encompass an internal and an external component:

Firstly, the 'France competence' in Saarland society is to be strengthened (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 3). To do so, the Saarland is envisioned to draw on already consolidated networks and numerous Franco-German institutions. *Networking and exchange of information* are still important (18.3%), but not as central as they are in Brandenburg. Instead, the profiling as a Franco-German region is largely based on the objective of *strengthening multilingualism and intercultural exchange* (28% of coded text). This endeavour is based on the insight that existing approaches were not yet successful in shaping a 'true cross-border region' (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 4, own translation). The goals relating to multilingualism and interculturality are far-reaching and touch upon virtually every area of life, including education, work, administration, culture and media. Culture and leisure activities, such as German-French festivals, are supposed to make the regional population's France orientation and competences 'concrete and palpable' (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 36, own translation) and French content in regional media is meant to root the language more deeply in everyday life (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, pp. 26–28). The region is to establish itself as a 'cross-border "European" cultural metropolis that can draw on a wealth of cross-border cultural creators and venues and, unlike other European metropolises,



**Figure 3.** Saarland strategy objectives.

Source: Own calculation based on France strategy of the Saarland.

benefits from short distances' (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 12, own translation). Saarland aims to develop a European model region with a common cross-border identity.

Secondly, as an integral part of sharpening the Franco-German character of the Saarland, Saarland's France-related expertise is to be strengthened in its external image. This is embedded in a framing according to which the Saarland is positioned in a competitive relationship with other federal states and border regions. The perception of the Saarland as the 'most French of all *Länder*' (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 33, own translation) should secure its independence and lead to the Saarland being taken seriously as *the* point of reference for Franco-German relations in France and Germany: 'From a French perspective, the Saarland should become a bridge to Germany and a gateway to France from a German perspective' (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 12).

To a much lesser extent, the Saarland sets out the objectives of strengthening the *cross-border economy and labour market* (7.4%), *cross-border infrastructure and service provision* (6.1%), *joint climate and environmental protection* (0.9%) and formulates the general intent to *align policy-making with the CBR level* (1.7%). These objectives are frequently embedded in multilingualism, for example through establishing a target quota of French-speaking employees, with a view to facilitating economic and labour market-related CBC.

### 3.3. Summary

As depicted in Table 2, the comparison of both strategies reveals distinct approaches to CBI. Saarland's strategy strongly emphasises place-making by fostering a unique Franco-German identity, promoting

**Table 2.** The Brandenburg and the Saarland strategy in comparison.

|                                                      | Brandenburg strategy                                                                                                                                                 | Saarland strategy                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Main objective and type of border resource mobilised | Value capture through cooperation and exchange of information.                                                                                                       | Place-making, gaining recognition through profiling as a Franco-German region.                                                                     |
| Domains concerned                                    | Comprehensive strategy encompassing a wide range of policy domains.<br>Focus on cross-border infrastructure and services, education, economy and labour, language.   | Focus on language, education, culture, identity, territorial marketing, economy and labour.                                                        |
| Purpose of cross-border cooperation                  | Mainly instrumental (enhancing utility, solving problems together).<br>To a lesser extent identity-providing (promoting multilingualism and intercultural exchange). | Mainly identity-providing (gaining public awareness and mobilisation, building a common territorial identity).<br>To a lesser extent instrumental. |

Source: Own analysis according to the framework of Sohn (2014).



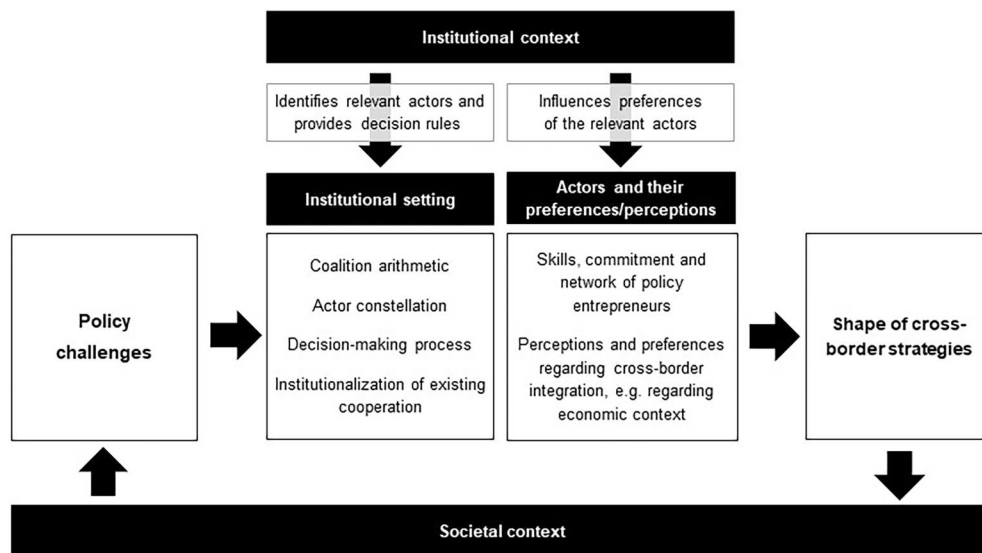
multilingualism and enhancing cultural exchange. The strategy explicitly aims to construct a strong regional image, both internally and externally and frames Saarland as ‘the most French of all *Länder*’ (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 33, own translation). Therefore, the Saarland’s strategy aligns closely with the *territorial project model* and its emphasis on cultural recognition, territorial marketing and shared spatial imaginaries. Conversely, Brandenburg’s strategy exhibits characteristics of the *geo-economic model*. Its focus lies on strengthening cross-border networks and removing functional barriers to cooperation, reflecting an instrumental approach to cross-border governance. Despite these distinctions, both strategies contain hybrid elements. While Saarland’s territorial approach dominates, it does incorporate some geo-economic aspects, particularly in workforce mobility and economic positioning. Similarly, Brandenburg’s strategy, while primarily geo-economic, includes elements of cultural and linguistic cooperation.

#### 4. Border strategies through the lens of the ACI

Having determined each strategy’s profile, we now address our second research question, namely, we ask how the identified differences can be explained. In Section 2, we argued that different shapes of cross-border strategies stem from various contextual factors on the one hand and strategic actor behaviour on the other hand. Given the complex institutional structures inherent in cross-border contexts, it is crucial to analyse the specific institutions in place as well as the behaviour of actors within these frameworks. Hence, employing ACI (Scharpf, 1997) can prove particularly beneficial for the analysis of CBI (Beck, 2022, p. 42), because the framework enables us to connect context-specific institutional settings with actor preferences in one and the same model. To accommodate the relevant factors of the cross-border context, we relate the ACI to insights from the border studies literature (e.g., Basboga, 2022; Sousa, 2013) by showing how border characteristics can be combined with the framework (see Figure 4).<sup>3</sup>

In general, ACI models policy change as the consequence of decisions made by political actors in response to policy challenges that occur within a certain institutional context. The main components of the ACI include actors, actor constellations and interaction forms (Treib, 2023). In our analysis, we slightly simplify the framework and summarise the second and the third aspect under the term *institutional setting*, which we will discuss first. Afterwards, we zoom in on expectations regarding *actors and their preferences*.

*Institutional setting.* According to the ACI, policy responses are negotiated by political actors such as parties, governments and ministries (Scharpf, 2000). They vary in their capacity for collective action: On one end of the spectrum, the ACI places *collective actors*, such as coalitions or associations which are internally organised but still depend largely on singular interests of their members. On the other end,



**Figure 4.** ACI in a cross-border context.

Source: Reduced and adapted to cross-border context based on Treib (2023).

*corporate actors* like ministries have a high capacity for collective action due to their internal hierarchical organisation. In our study, we move slightly beyond the ACI regarding the observed actor level. As organisations are comprised of individual actors that often times have a considerable room for manoeuvre, policy outcomes largely depend on who occupies a certain institutional position and is therefore responsible for decision-making. Therefore, only observing the level of collective actors is always connected to information loss (Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995, p. 50). In some cases, one example being cross-border contexts, policy processes are known to be influenced strongly by individual policy entrepreneurs and networks (Hataley & Mason, 2018; Renner et al., 2018), which makes it useful to include the individual level (see Treib, 2023, p. 272).

In our study, the relevant corporate actors are the ministries of the German states Brandenburg and Saarland. Moreover, we include *individual actors* involved in the development of the strategies. These actors operate within an institutional context which defines the rules of negotiations as well as which strategies are available to them. Hence, we have to account for the institutional structure of the regional governments (Brandenburg, Saarland) and their respective procedural rules that were applied in strategy development. The general institutional setting in Saarland and Brandenburg was rather similar at the time of strategy development with governing coalitions of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats (plus, the Greens in Brandenburg). In both cases, we would therefore expect that the coalition parties needed to find consensus on how to develop the cross-border strategies. From the outset, however, the manoeuvring room for the respective government actors seems similar. This does not mean, however, that variation in internal governmental structures may not affect the shape the cross-border strategies took.

*Actors and their preferences.* Following the ACI, institutions not only set the general rules of the games, but they also influence both political actors' preferences and their perceptions (of situations, resources, possible actions). These are relatively stable over time and influence reactions to occurring policy challenges. As the ACI usually looks at corporate actors, it argues that their most fundamental preferences can be tied back to the organisational strive for self-preservation and autonomy. Further preferences concern role expectations and identities which, in turn, depend on institutional characteristics.<sup>4</sup> As discussed above, we will move beyond the usual scope of the ACI and take individual interests and preferences into account. In our empirical setting, actors' perceptions and preferences can be tied back to the specific integration potential of the border region regarding the two ideal-type models introduced above, namely the *geo-economic model* and the *territorial project* (Sohn, 2014). More precisely, the integration potential can be related to a number of factors, including the perception of economic and geographical conditions and the historical context.

First, decision makers' perceptions are influenced by the historical context and any previous integration steps. As the border studies literature suggests, close ties and sociocultural similarities can reduce the transaction costs for initiating new connections and cooperation strategies and may thus help to initiate more comprehensive cooperation (Boman & Berg, 2007; Sarmiento-Mirwaldt & Roman-Kamphaus, 2013; Sousa, 2013). Equally, path dependency plays a big role insofar as existing cooperation between states or regions will likely result in further steps of integration. The longer the tradition a CBC programme can look back on, 'the longer-term will be the strategic vision to implement this process in the border area' (Medeiros, 2015). Relating this to the above framework, the territorial project not only fosters but also rests upon a shared identity and history (Sohn, 2014). Therefore, we expect that the perception of actors regarding the already achieved integration profile strongly influenced the shape of the strategies and that Saarland actors stress the unique profile of the Saarland and a shared identity.

Second, the literature often discusses the impact of geographical factors on CBRs: Major biophysical obstacles, especially the lack of a common land border, can for instance severely hinder cooperation (Klatt & Herrmann, 2011), whereas common natural resources like rivers can motivate cooperation (Sousa, 2013). While we do not have any straightforward expectations, it can be argued that in order to achieve a cohesive territorial project with intense societal interactions, the absence of a hard geographical border is of even greater importance than the emergence of a region following the geo-economic model and that this might be stressed by relevant actors.

Third, the actors' perception of the economic context, more specifically of potential economic differentials between two regions (Sohn & Licheron, 2018), can influence cross-border dynamics. If strategy development is closely linked to such economic drivers, it can further be related to the geo-economic model based on value capture (Sohn, 2014). In general, it can be argued that regions with identical economic

structures have less need for cooperation because no further advantages are to be expected from stronger economic integration. The same is true if differences are very large, because exchange makes less sense (e.g., very low-skilled workforce on one side of the border vs. need for highly skilled workers on the other) (Harquindéguy & Sánchez Sánchez, 2017; Sousa, 2013). As both strategies address the economic dimension, we expect them to perceive the economic asymmetries to be a driving factor.

#### **4.1. Comparative case analysis: how the cross-border strategies came about**

To understand how and why Brandenburg and Saarland developed their respective strategies in the way they did, we relied on process tracing as a qualitative method to identify causal mechanisms (Blatter & Haverland, 2014; George & Bennett, 2005). This method is well suited for Y-centred research questions focusing on how and why policies are developed (Blatter & Haverland, 2014). The process tracing is based on two types of data. First, we did documentary research, collecting available information about the strategies (e.g., newspaper articles, ministerial documents, etc.). Second, and most importantly, we conducted interviews with state-level politicians and bureaucrats. In total, we conducted six interviews with policy actors from Saarland and six interviews with actors from the wider Saarland-France border region. In Brandenburg, we conducted eight interviews with federal state actors and 15 interviews with actors involved in German-Polish cooperation. Starting with Saarland, we will outline the results along the ACI framework presented above.

#### **4.2. France strategy of the Saarland**

##### **4.2.1. Institutional setting**

The institutional setting during strategy development was marked by two policy windows, large political support and engaged political and administrative actors. First, the snap election of 2012 (after the failure of the former CDU-FDP-Green ‘Jamaica’ government) led to the formation of a new ‘grand coalition’ government led by the Christian Democrats (CDU) with the Social Democrats (SPD) as Junior Partner. While the CDU had been in government before and Franco-German cooperation had always been part of their political DNA (Int8\_P8\_20230406\_LB\_SL),<sup>5</sup> the formation of a grand coalition had provided an opportunity to rally the main political forces behind the project. Moreover, the government term started with the preparations for the 50-year-anniversary of the Franco-German Elysée treaty which was celebrated in 2013. This occasion equally provoked a re-organisation of the existing cooperation initiatives which had formed and grown over multiple decades. In this context, the strategy found its first mention in the coalition agreement of the new government (CDU Saar & SPD Saarland, 2012) (Int8\_P8\_20230406\_LB\_SL). One interviewee described the situation as follows:

So, this has matured in the discourse with each other, and then also in 2012 with a turning point. There was a political turning point with the Social Democrats, the chance to put something like this on a broad political and social basis. ... If this is disputed between the two major political forces in the state, then it is very, very difficult to implement. And here the grand coalition has of course also offered ... a historic opportunity ... The idea was that if both major parties, which have a huge reach in the Saarland compared to other German states, or compared to the national level, there is at least a chance that there will be a social foundation for this. (Int9\_P9\_20230427\_LB\_SL, own translation)

The specific policy venue was decisive in shaping the strategy, as well. It was developed in the Saarland Ministry for the Interior, Culture and Europe where selected administration staff had large room for manoeuvre in designing strategy contents. As one political actor stated, there was much trust in the administrative actors which were described as having ‘incredible expertise in Franco-German’ and being ‘as far as cross-border cooperation is concerned ... one of the most capable and competent people in Germany ... at the high working level’ (Int9\_P9\_20230427\_LB\_SL). Therefore, while the general strategy idea had been mentioned in the coalition agreement, the impetus for concrete content largely stemmed from the administrative level. As the institutional context offered corporate and individual actors broad leeway, their preferences and perceptions were incorporated in the final strategy to a high degree, as depicted in the following.

#### 4.2.2. Actors and their preferences

As discussed in Section 4, one main preference of corporate actors concerns their autonomy and self-perseverance. In the case of the Saarland strategy, this preference has clearly been relevant. As a small, financially weak state, the Saarland has faced recurring discussions about merging with Rhineland-Palatinate since joining the Federal Republic of Germany in 1957. This topic resurfaced in the 2012 state elections after a survey showed declining support for an autonomous Saarland (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2012). Prime Minister at the time Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (CDU) stated that politicians would have to ‘do a better job in showing to citizens the advantages of an autonomous Saarland’ (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2012, cited in Caspari, 2012, own translation). Against this background, the Saarland’s strategy states on its first page that the expertise concerning France ‘is a great opportunity for the future and the independence of our state’ (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 1). The strategy aims to shape both external and internal perceptions of Saarland’s autonomy, a point confirmed throughout the document and by interviewees, who for example stated that it ‘should serve the development and profiling of the state’ (Int9\_P9\_20221122\_LB\_SL).

Furthermore, we argued that the historical context, path dependencies and socio-cultural identity of the CBR can shape the preferences of policy actors. In the decision about the specific thematic focus, path dependency clearly played a strong role:

We have the approaches, so to speak, of our special character in the relationship with France ... multilingual day-care centres, or schools, this all comes from the past. ... And I believe that what developed in 2012 was our idea that we said we already have many approaches, we can build on many things, but we don’t really have a strategy, how should I put it, to bundle them and to really go for a clearly set goal. (Int8\_P8\_20230406\_LB\_SL, own translation)

The interviewees further identified a high number of actors and strong networks as favourable conditions for strategy development. It was felt that the Saarland had ‘an incredible concentration of France expertise and France-specific institutions in the country’ (Int2\_P2\_20221205\_LB\_SL, own translation). While these institutions were identified in all areas of society, one interviewee most notably referenced the cultural dimension:

[W]e have so many ties, not only historical, but also really cultural. We have many associations that make an effort and it is also-, it is simply part of our culture, if you look at the cultural landscape of the Saarland, it runs through. (Int1\_P1\_20221122\_LB\_SL, own translation)

All these ties accumulated, according to one interviewee, to a specific Saarland identity which in turn favoured the thematic direction of the strategy:

But the population, they had been living on both sides of the border for a long time already. My feeling is that this had already been part of our self-perception ... of our way of life. And we had been proud of that. Because, when we had visitors from other areas of Germany, then we liked showing that to them, how we were living in a cross-border way. So, first, the chance of a cross-border life in so many different areas; from sports, shopping, going out to eat, to just name some profane things, that had long been a part of everyone’s life. And when there were guests from elsewhere, everyone was proud and also liked to show off that we just have a bigger cheese selection than in Lower Saxony. (Int4\_P4\_20230207\_LB\_SL, own translation)

A mutual understanding amongst the cross-border population was stressed by another interviewee who noted: ‘We may not all speak perfect French, but we understand our French partners well in the sense of being able to understand them. So, not only linguistically, but an intercultural dimension came into play’ (Int2\_P2\_20221205\_LB\_SL, own translation). Therefore, the already perceived shared identity was decisive for the decision to strategically strengthen this aspect even more towards a *territorial project*.

Interestingly, geographical factors, namely the small area of the Saarland and the absence of geographical barriers, were identified as an important base for close-knit ties to the neighbouring country. With its small surface area, ‘basically the whole Saarland is in a position of having some sort of contact with France’ (Int2\_P2\_20221205\_LB\_SL, own translation). This situation was experienced as different and more conducive for a true integration compared to, for example, the Upper Rhine, because there:

The Rhine is the border and there aren’t so many bridges, so it’s different here. Here I can simply cross over into Moselle at dozens of places. If I have a river in between, I can’t just do that. The whole thing is simply stronger there. (Int2\_P2\_20221205\_LB\_SL, own translation)

Lastly, as we noted in our analysis of the strategies in Section 3, the Saarland strategy does not correspond strictly to the ideal type of the *territorial project*. Instead, it has a noteworthy number of references related to the economy and labour market. The interviews revealed that the complementary economical potential of the Saarland and the neighbouring Lorraine was indeed considered as a decisive driver behind the envisioned integration sketched out in the strategy. More precisely, one interviewee described how the shortage of skilled workers in Saarland could potentially be solved through training and employment of French citizens – which would benefit from a high level of language skills on both sides of the border:

The topic of vocational education was very important, because at this time, let's say, also on a national level, but specifically in border regions, we have seen a reversal of conditions, so a declining youth unemployment in Saarland and an emerging shortage of skilled workers and on the other side, a high level of youth unemployment. And the basic idea was actually, can we not bring this together, that we say, we help in the bureaucracy, we help in the language, and then French trainees, for example, can do their training here ... and then, for example, also work here, which makes it possible that they can live in their region, and we ... have also solved a skilled labour problem. (Int8\_P8\_20220406\_LB\_SL, own translation)

Notwithstanding, these economic aims were connected to ideational aspects by the interviewees. In this vein, speaking the neighbouring language was perceived not only as a question of identity building, but also as a concrete functional tool, as the following quote illustrates:

For me, language is the basis for everything else. Language transports culture. Language also opens doors in economic centres. ... [H]earts open up when you speak French. And first speak to a partner, even to an entrepreneur, in his or her mother tongue. Then it's possible that the technical details will still be clarified in English. But I don't just need open minds, I also need open hearts. (...) And with the younger ones, they have simply recognised the opportunity on the labour market. (Int4\_P4\_20230207\_LB\_SL, own translation)

Summed up, the findings from the interviews confirm the hybrid classification between the two ideal-types, though exhibiting a focus on the *territorial project*. They furthermore demonstrated that the historical and cultural context as well as the state identity played a role in shaping the actors' preferences. Additionally, geographical proximity supported the vision of a deeply integrated region, while economic disparities contributed to the inclusion of functional elements.

### 4.3. Neighbourhood strategy Brandenburg-Polen

#### 4.3.1. Institutional setting

As in the case of the Saarland strategy, similar political and institutional factors and policy windows facilitated the development of the neighbourhood strategy in the German-Polish context. After the 2019 Brandenburg state parliamentary election, a 'Kenia coalition' including Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and the Greens was formed. In the coalition negotiations, several policy entrepreneurs in the field of German-Polish cooperation from these parties successfully pushed for the neighbourhood strategy and the position of a 'Representative for Brandenburg-Polish Relations' being integrated in the coalition agreement. A key actor from the Social Democrats was part of the party's working group on Poland that had existed since 2015 and was lobbying for deepening German-Polish relations:

And that is why our working group on Poland has regularly attempted since 2015 to bring in a certain position into the political process. As you have pointed it out correctly, we have succeeded by impacting on the creation of the coalition agreement. But it was also related to the fact that our party colleague Katrin Lange [the current Minister of Finance and for European Affairs] is pretty much interested in Europe and Poland. She has recognised the potential of such a strategy and fostered it in the respective committees. We also had the special feature that in the coalition negotiations experts on Poland from all the three parties have been involved. (Int19\_P23\_20230503\_LB\_BB, own translation)

Another factor supporting political action was the 30-year-anniversary of the German-Polish Treaty on Good Neighbourhood from 17 June 1991, which provides the legal basis for cross-border political cooperation between Germany and Poland (Int7\_P9\_20220927\_LB\_BB; Int4\_P6\_20220927\_LB\_BB): The neighbourhood strategy was adopted by the Brandenburg state government on 15 June 2021 – two days before the date of the anniversary. In parallel, the state parliament extended the mandate for cooperation with Poland in Article 2 of the Brandenburg constitution, demanding state actors to 'maintain and develop



friendly neighbouring relations with Poland' (Land Brandenburg, 2022, Article 2, own translation). Thus, cooperation with Poland became a 'constitutional task' in Brandenburg (Int9\_P13\_20221014\_LB\_BB). With the growing electoral success of the right-wing party 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD), which in 2019 became the largest opposition party in the Brandenburg state parliament, the governing coalition also aimed at sending a clear political statement towards its Polish partners.

Moreover, the fact that Dietmar Woidke, the Prime Minister of Brandenburg, since 2014 held the position of the Coordinator for German-Polish Cooperation on behalf of the German federal government, can be considered as a favouring political factor for the creation of the strategy. Or, as an interviewee summarises the specific political and institutional context in Brandenburg:

A peculiarity for Brandenburg is that Prime Minister Woidke was appointed as the national authorised representative of the federal government for German-Polish relations. And, also the statement in the federal constitution for the cooperation with Poland is unique in Germany. The cooperation with Poland has a constitutional status – in a cross-border or political context which makes it even more special compared to Berlin. (Int5\_P7\_20220927\_LB\_BB, own translation)

The concrete development of the Brandenburg neighbourhood strategy was then overseen by the Ministry of Finance and for European Affairs, involving and consulting all ministries of the state government (Int5\_P7\_20220927\_LB\_BB; Int8\_P10\_20221011\_LB\_BB). Moreover, local stakeholders were involved in the development of the strategy:

Then we have discussed how can we create it [the neighbourhood strategy]. We have thought about different participation forms. On the one hand, we wanted to involve the different regional department and institutions as we had the plan to make a thematically overarching strategy and so we had to involve all the departments. On the other hand, we had the claim to involve actors from Brandenburg. And also, Polish actors to say: Please give us input on themes and challenges that you know from your activities in the cross-border context. Which goals can the federal state government formulate? It was clear from the beginning: It will be a strategy of the federal state government. We cannot cover all but it is very helpful to get feedback from all the other levels. (Int8\_P10\_20221011\_LB\_BB, own translation)

Comparing this to the situation in Saarland, it is clear that the actor range in Brandenburg was more diverse, mirroring the more balanced distribution of addressed policy fields in the Brandenburg strategy.

#### 4.3.2. *Actors and their preferences*

The Brandenburg policy actors developed the cross-border strategy in an environment which significantly differed from the situation alongside the Franco-German border. The much shorter history of cooperation has been largely shaped by the Interreg programmes since Poland joined the EU in 2004. Previously, cross-border exchange and cooperation faced numerous obstacles. After the Second World War, the German Democratic Republic (GDR)-Poland border was opened for visa-free travel in 1972, but closed again in 1980 due to the political situation in Poland (Opiłowska, 2022, pp. 88–89). The 1991 German-Polish Neighbourhood Treaty initiated a policy of convergence. Since then, German-Polish relations have been shaped at the national level by the German-Polish Intergovernmental Commission for Regional and Cross-border Cooperation, and at the local level by German-Polish Euroregions, founded from 1991 onwards (Ulrich, 2021, p. 562).

Thus, the historical context and notably the complicated and violent history through shifting borders and the re-settlement of parts of the population impacted German-Polish relations in general and the thought process of actors who worked on the Brandenburg strategy in particular:

Historically, for the federal state of Brandenburg the focus on Europe and Poland is connected with the re-foundation of the Land. Due to the fact that it is bordering Poland and connected with the hope of historical reappraisal, Brandenburg's state politics is closely linked with Poland. (Int8\_P12\_20221011\_LB\_BB, own translation)

Polish interviewees stress the additional challenges of the German-Polish border region caused by the need to catch up with long-term development processes in the context of the EU and the challenges of systemic transformation after the fall of the Iron Curtain a few decades ago:

Everything that is there [in the German-French border region] is also here, it's all similar [...]. It's just that the Marshall Plan covered both Germany and France [...]. And it was easier there, because there was no communism, from 45 to 89. And here there was communism, and we are poorer because of that, delayed because of that. (Int17\_P21\_20230322\_LB\_BB, own translation)

In addition to the perception of being in an economically disadvantaged position, interviewed actors referred to major differences between the eastern and the western border regions with respect to societal integration and the linguistic boundary:

You have to see that the border and the border area is historically, regarding mobility and linguistically completely different than the German-French border area, and especially the Saarland-French border area. Because we are a young border region. [...] At the border live populations that did not live there before [before 1945]. That – in my opinion – is a huge difference to the German-French border plus the fact that it is a hard linguistic boundary. (Int8\_P12\_20221011\_LB\_BB, own translation)

Against this background, the focus of the strategy's objectives on networking and interlinkage becomes very plausible. As the CBR is only establishing itself as such and there are – in comparison – less strong civil society networks, the goal to work towards building bridges in society, politics and administration is crucial.

At the same time, the economic asymmetries between both countries – in general – were perceived as an important driver for economic exchange by the interviewees. Nevertheless, the strategic focus on themes concerning the economy and labour market is not as strong as could be expected with the objective being only the fourth most referenced in the Brandenburg strategy document (Section 3). On the one hand, this can be tied back to the need to establish a general interlinkage of actors in a first step, as described above. On the other hand, Brandenburg is highly interwoven with the German national capital Berlin which is situated in the middle as the 'heart' of the federal state. Here, economic and commuter relations are highly developed, with Berlin being a multidimensional (and competing) node in German-Polish relations (Int5\_P7\_20220927\_LB\_BB). Therefore, despite integration potential stemming from economic asymmetries, the pull to the capital region seemingly makes the cross-border potential less attractive.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Political actors from the local up to the European level are increasingly engaged in cross-border politics. While scholarly attention has so far been directed predominantly at activities on the local level, the role of regional governments as well as their different approaches have hardly been analysed. Contributing to closing this gap, this paper has scrutinised two core cross-border strategy documents of the German *Länder* Brandenburg and Saarland, which lay out guidelines for cross-border policies in the respective regions. Both strategies perform a shift of political activity to the cross-border level (Setti, 2025) and might be an indicator that the German *Länder* and other European regions are starting to readjust their policy radius to encompass the cross-border level, contributing to the horizontal dimension of European integration (Beck, 2022).

To carve out the specific nature of these policies, we related them to the framework proposed by Sohn (2014), discerning between two ideal-types of CBI: the *geo-economic model* and the *territorial project*. In the Brandenburg neighbourhood strategy, we find elements of the geo-economic model, with a focus on functional aspects such as infrastructure and public service provision. Nevertheless, the strategy equally aims at strengthening civil society encounters, network building, cultural exchange and language acquisition.

Comparing this to the Saarland strategy, elements of the *territorial project* are more prevalent, as it places a clear focus on promoting the internal and external profile of the *Land* as a 'multilingual area with a Franco-German character' (Saarländische Landesregierung, 2014, p. 4, own translation) and strongly promotes language teaching across all age groups. Nevertheless, this strategy equally cannot be placed seamlessly in the ideal-type category but does display characteristics of the geo-economic model with its focus on value capture through labour market asymmetries.

To understand the specific profiles and strategic differences in the two documents, we used ACI (Scharpf, 1997) and adapted the framework by introducing factors discussed in the border studies literature, such as economic and geographical characteristics of the CBR and the historical context. The framework proved helpful to make sense of the institutional contexts and actor dispositions which favoured the strategies' development. Interestingly, the institutional contexts both in Saarland and Brandenburg had major parallels with policy windows in the shape of new state governments, broad party coalitions and anniversaries related to the respective neighbour country. Specificities which then left an imprint on the respective strategy shapes can be found in the development processes: While in Saarland, few administrative actors had a large leeway in the development of new ideas for CBC, the Brandenburg approach focused more on involving and

collecting ideas from every branch of government, resulting in a broader and thematically more balanced strategy document, confirming the influence of engaged policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 2011; Renner et al., 2018).

Concerning policy actors' preferences and perceptions, we find that the Saarland actors focused on common identity, societal ties and shared history as a starting point for developing the thematic profile. Notwithstanding, this focus was partially instrumental as cultural and linguistic cohesion was intended to create economic opportunities and support the exploitation of labour market asymmetries which relates more to the geo-economic model. These findings align with the results of the qualitative content analysis and help understand the hybrid nature of the strategic outlook. For Brandenburg, it was exactly the perceived *lack* of strong societal ties which motivated strategy adoption, according to the interviewees. In this vein, the strategic focus on network building and interlinkage presents an evident objective. While this does not fit either of the ideal-types perfectly, it remains to be seen whether the Land Brandenburg might put a stronger emphasis on either functional or ideational cross-border relations on the basis of a stronger societal interlinking in the future.

Our research has spotlighted regional governments' increased orientation towards the cross-border level. While this is a noteworthy development in itself, future research needs to observe how far these strategic goals are translated into actual policy-making and which transformative potential they hold for the border regions. Especially in the case of identity-building measures in a top-down manner, as is occurring in the Saarland strategy, it remains to be seen if citizens are willing to perform the profound adaptation that is being asked of them. As previous research has hinted at, there can be reservations if measures feel imposed and not aligned with the perceived self-identity of the population (Krämer, 2019).

Future research would also benefit from including the 'other side of the border' by bringing in policy orientations from all jurisdictions constituting a CBR. While regional governments' strategies, as analysed here, can act as important drivers of CBI, they depend upon the willingness of other cross-border actors to achieve their intended effects. Moreover, and as this analysis has shown, the economic context plays a decisive role for cross-border policy and could serve as a starting point for future comparative research. Lastly, other CBRs with diverse institutional contexts should be analysed to elaborate if strategies can be successfully implemented without support from all major parties as well as related policy windows and focussing events, as was the case with both strategies analysed here. Especially with the growing support of right-wing populist parties, it remains to be seen if the 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2005, p. 426) will also reach the cross-border level or if CBRs will instead be sites of further horizontal integration (Beck, 2022).

## Notes

1. The Brandenburg paper exists in a short and long version. For this analysis, we decided to use the shorter version as it better compares to the Saarland document in terms of length. Also, the Saarland strategy has been regularly concretised in form of the so-called *feuilles de routes*, which we also do not include in the comparison.
2. Brandenburg strategy paper: 20 policy areas, median of shares of coded text: 4.75% of the document; Saarland strategy paper: 15 policy areas, median: 2.30%.
3. Our framework follows the overall logic of the ACI, according to which policy problems, institutions and actors' preferences are crucial elements to understanding policy formation. In contrast, we do not provide a detailed analysis of actors' constellations and a game-theoretical analysis of the interactions between them.
4. The ACI treats actors as a distinct category because 'even if external and institutional conditions remain constant, policies can change if the cognitive and normative orientations of policy makers change' (Scharpf, 2000, p. 771). However, these orientations, rooted in the actor's self-interest and normative obligations and aspirations, are, in turn, affected by institutional features. Although this theoretical reasoning is straightforward, empirically identifying the actor's preferences is challenging – especially if several preference dimensions are thinkable (Treib, 2023, p. 258).
5. Interview references contain participant number, interview number, interview date and case (SL = Saarland; BB = Brandenburg). Int8\_P8\_20230406\_LB\_SL equates to "Interview number 8 with interview participant number 8, conducted on the 04.06.2023 as part of the project Linking Borderlands in the Saarland case.

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## Ethics statement

All experts interviewed for this research provided written informed consent to the use and anonymous publication of the information they shared.

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## Data availability statement

For ethical reasons, interview data cannot be made available for this article.

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