



Gateway to Europe Eurocity: a failed project of local cross-border cooperation on the Spain–Portugal Border?

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Abstract The Gateway to Europe Eurocity European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (GEE EGTC), located in a low-density area of the Portuguese–Spanish border, serves as the case study for this research. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, the paper examines local perspectives on the Eurocity and cross-border cooperation. The findings reveal deep demographic and socio-economic challenges, particularly depopulation and the decline of border-related activities, alongside the persistence of symbolic and cultural ties that foster shared identity. While the GEE EGTC has so far remained largely inactive and disconnected from everyday life, the study highlights both the obstacles that hinder its implementation—such as political discontinuities, institutional fragmentation, and limited resources—and the opportunities to reshape cross-border cooperation through more bottom-up and multi-scalar approaches. These results contribute to the debate on the role and limitations of Eurocities in rural border

contexts and invite further reflection on the need to adapt this concept beyond predominantly urban settings.

Keywords Eurocity · Cross-border cooperation · EGTC · Cross-border urban areas

Introduction

Cross-border cooperation has gained prominence in the European Union (EU) since the 1990s, particularly through the funding provided by the Interreg programme (Sassano, 2020). In this context, urban areas located in border regions have acquired special relevance, giving rise to initiatives under various names: cross-border agglomerations, cross-border metropolises, twin cities, eurodistricts, eurocities, and others (Buursink, 2001; Chilla et al., 2010; Garrard & Mikhailova, 2019; Mikhailova & Garrard, 2021; Sohn, 2014, 2022). Following the establishment of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) in 2006, these projects have progressively gained importance, even becoming an instrument of the EU's neighbourhood policy through the creation of groupings with partners from non-member countries (Lois, Cairo & Limón, 2022).

This research pays particular attention to the term Eurocity, which is used exclusively in the Iberian Peninsula and, similarly to the concept of Euroregion (Medeiros, 2018), incorporates the prefix "euro-" to

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highlight its connection with the EU framework. The term is applied to various cross-border cooperation projects between cities, usually small in size, which—regardless of their governance structure or specific agreements—aspire to work together, with local population involvement as one of their key foundations (Trillo-Santamaría, Lois & Paül, 2015).

The Iberian Peninsula hosts numerous cross-border cooperation initiatives, including nine known as Eurocities¹ (Jurado-Almonte & Pazos-García, 2020), seven fully established and two others in advanced stages of formation. The Basque Eurocity/Eurocité Basque/Euskal Eurohiria, created in 1993, was the first to adopt this name and remains the only Eurocity on the Spanish–French border (Trillo-Santamaría, Amado & Paül, 2025; López Trigal & López-Fernández, 2021). The other eight are located along the Spanish–Portuguese border, known locally as the *raia* (in Portuguese and Galician) or *raya* (in Spanish), which makes this frontier a particularly relevant context for the study of cross-border cooperation (Cairo et al., 2024).

The most recent Eurocity, registered as an EGTC in early 2023, is the so-called Gateway to Europe Eurocity (GEE). It is situated between the province of Salamanca, in Castilla y León (Spain), and the district of Guarda, in Portugal. The entity comprises three municipalities—two Spanish (Ciudad Rodrigo and Fuentes de Oñoro) and one Portuguese (Almeida)—along with one parish belonging to the latter (Vilar Formoso). Its primary objective is to counter depopulation and foster socio-economic dynamism through cross-border cooperation in a region that has faced demographic and economic decline over recent decades (Martín Jiménez, 2025).

At the end of 2024, interviews were conducted with representatives from local politics, technical staff, and key figures from civil society in the border area where the GEE EGTC is located. The main goal was to understand the motivations that led to the creation of this Eurocity. In addition, the study seeks to analyse its activities and impacts since its early steps

in 2020 and throughout the nearly two years since its formal establishment as an EGTC.

Following this introduction, the theoretical framework discusses the concepts of cross-border urban area and Eurocity, as well as their applications. The methodological section outlines the process of conducting interviews—the primary source for this research—together with the subsequent treatment of the data, whose analysis is presented in the results section. Finally, the discussion connects the findings with the theoretical framework and draws conclusions on both the case study and the concept of Eurocity itself.

The conceptualization of Eurocities

Cross-border urban areas: between morphological and functional dimensions

Borders have undergone a significant process of re-signification in recent decades (Durà et al., 2018; Lois, 2013; Noferini et al., 2019; Svensson & Balogh, 2018). In contexts such as the EU, their role as fixed markers of nation-state sovereignty has shifted towards greater permeability and a reduction of their barrier effect (Durand & Perrin, 2017; Noferini et al., 2019; Rumford, 2006). Cross-border cooperation policies adopted within this framework of debordering have even fostered the view of the border as a shared resource to be jointly managed (Durand & Perrin, 2017; Herzog & Sohn, 2017; Newman, 2006; Paasi, 2009; Wieckowski & Timothy, 2021). At the same time, borders have gained prominence as an academic object of study, with cross-border urban areas becoming one of the most frequently analysed topics (Sohn & Lara-Valencia, 2013; Trillo-Santamaría et al., 2015).

In the case at hand, it is worth highlighting the studies addressing the definition of such areas, particularly those by Buursink (2001) and Ehlers (2001). Although they are not the earliest academic references on cross-border urban areas (cf. Gildersleeve, 1978), they represent a key benchmark in the field (Trillo-Santamaría et al., 2015). Buursink (2001, p. 17) argues that the most suitable term for these spaces is “border-crossing cities”, defined as “border cities that establish contacts” and which, “due to their proximity, give the impression of two physical masses

¹ It should be distinguished from the “Eurocities” network of major European cities: (https://social-economy-gateway.europa.eu/eurocities_en), which represents large urban centres across Europe and is unrelated to local cross-border cooperation initiatives (Gebhardt & Güntner, 2021; Griffiths, 1995).

extending beyond the border”. By contrast, Ehlers (2001) proposes the term “binational city”, referring to the full integration of two contiguous cities into a single entity. In both definitions, the establishment of joint projects is emphasised, although in the latter case it is suggested that such projects foster a sense of identity that transcends the border.

Building on this foundation, various other terms have been proposed that also stress the physical contiguity of two (or more) cross-border urban areas, albeit with certain differences between them. One of the most widely used in the literature is “twin cities”, referring to “two cities [...] located on either side of the border [...] with a special relationship [...] not necessarily friendly or functional” (Garrard & Mikhailova, 2019; Mikhailova & Garrard, 2021, p. 1). This term directly and necessarily refers to urban areas composed of two contiguous cities, thus excluding polycentric systems. In contrast, the Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT, 2010) introduced the notion of “transfrontier conurbation”, encompassing both monocentric and polycentric systems. These also require physical contiguity and may or may not be governed by a joint administrative and/or cooperation structure (MOT, 2010).

Other labels avoid highlighting the morphological characteristics of such spaces and instead focus on their functional dimension. Within this framework, notable examples include: “transborder metropolis”,

used for the Mexico–United States border (Alegria, 2009; Bae, 2003); “cross-border metropolis” or “cross-border metropolitan region”, applied to the European context (Chilla et al., 2010; Sohn, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2022; ULB, 2007); and the French-language term “agglomération transfrontalière” (MOT, 2000, 2003, 2006). All of these terms convey the existence of interrelations between cities that are not interrupted by the border, regardless of whether or not there is an administrative and/or cooperative structure in place. While morphology is not central here, physical contiguity is not required and these areas can be monocentric or polycentric.

In short, and with the aim of clarifying the similarities and differences between the above terms, Table 1 summarises the main features associated with each.

Eurocities within the framework of European integration processes

European cross-border urban areas have constituted a distinctive arena since the 1980s (Durand & Lamour, 2014; Jańczak, 2017; Noferini et al., 2019; Sohn & Lara-Valencia, 2013). This is due to cohesion and territorial integration policies promoted by the European Commission, which have encouraged the creation of cross-border governance structures at the local–urban scale (Decoville et al., 2013; Durand & Lamour, 2014; Durand & Perrin, 2017; Noferini et al., 2019).

Table 1 Characteristics associated with different terms referring to cross-border urban areas. Source: Author’s own adaptation based on references listed in the first column.

Term and references	Main characteristics
“ <i>Border-crossing cities</i> ” Buursink (2001)	Physical contiguity between two cities Mutual interrelation Joint project planning
“ <i>Binational city</i> ” Ehlers (2001)	Physical contiguity between two cities Mutual interrelation Joint project planning Sense of shared identity
“ <i>Twin cities</i> ” Garrard & Mikhailov, (2019); Mikhailova & Garrard, (2021)	Physical contiguity Monocentric system Interrelation not necessarily friendly and/or functional
“ <i>Transfrontier conurbation</i> ” MOT (2010)	Physical contiguity between two (or more) cities Interrelation may not exist
“ <i>Agglomération transfrontalière</i> ”; “ <i>Cross-border metropolis/metropolitan region</i> ”; “ <i>Transborder metropolis</i> ” Alegria (2009); Bae (2003); Chilla et al. (2010); MOT (2000, 2003, 2006); Sohn (2010, 2012, 2014, 2022); ULB (2007)	Physical contiguity not required Can be monocentric or polycentric Functional interrelation, not necessarily articulated administratively and/or under a cooperation structure

In this regard, the launch in 1989 of the Interreg programme, a funding instrument for cooperation initiatives (Interreg Europe, 2025), and the adoption in 2006 of the regulation enabling the establishment of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) are particularly noteworthy. However, as Valadas (2024) points out, European integration processes are often conceived not only as top-down initiatives driven by supranational institutions, but also, at least theoretically, as bottom-up dynamics shaped by everyday practices, local interactions, and the interdependence between societal, institutional, and organizational contexts.

Under this approach, Eurocities have played a significant role on the Iberian Peninsula (Medeiros & Neto, 2021; Trillo-Santamaría, Paül & Vila-Lage, 2021), as they are characterized by being initiatives led by the authorities of two or more urban centres located on or near a state border, embedded in European integration processes, and seeking in some way to overcome obstacles linked to that border (cf. Durand & Decoville, 2018). These initiatives aim to jointly manage a set of services, facilities and/or infrastructures under municipal ownership (González-Gómez et al., 2019; Lozano-Valencia, 2007). In this sense, Eurocities can be seen as local laboratories where European integration is enacted on the ground (Lois, Cairo & Limón, 2022; Valadas, 2024), similarly to other experiences of urban cross-border cooperation developed across the EU, such as the “eurodistricts” or “eurometropolises” (Durand & Lamour, 2014; Durand & Perrin, 2017).

Nevertheless, in some cases, as a consequence of overly ambitious or maximalist approaches, many Eurocities have failed to deliver on their respective agendas (Trillo-Santamaría & Vila-Lage, 2021). In fact, some, located in contexts of demographic and economic decline, have been unable to counteract or mitigate such trends despite the efforts made (Martín Jiménez, 2025; Cairo et al., 2024; Castanho et al., 2017). From this perspective, the persistent legal and institutional barriers that hinder the operationalisation of initiatives and delay project implementation, as highlighted by Valadas (2024), remain one of the major obstacles for Eurocities to fully integrate into citizens’ daily lives.

This situation has led to the avoidance of more complex issues, such as spatial planning and urban development, in favour of seemingly less contentious

domains like the organisation of cultural, sporting, or social events and the promotion of tourism (Trillo-Santamaría & Vila-Lage, 2021; Duque & Carvalho, 2023; Amado, Paül & Trillo-Santamaría, 2024). In fact, as Medeiros (2024) observes, cross-border urban planning remains at an incipient stage, as other priorities tend to dominate local agendas. Although, in theory, Eurocities follow a bottom-up logic (Calzada, 2018; González-Gómez et al., 2019; Sousa, 2013), there are significant shortcomings in the participation of non-institutional actors and local communities (González-Gómez et al., 2019; Valadas, 2024).

Finally, based on the studies by Jurado-Almonte and Pazos-García (2017), Trillo-Santamaría & Vila-Lage (2021), Castanho & Naranjo-Gómez (2019) and Trillo-Santamaría et al. (2021), seven key factors can be identified as contributing to the success of such projects:

- i. Compiling an inventory of resources, services, infrastructure and facilities managed jointly;
- ii. Defining a strategy or other equivalent planning instrument;
- iii. An active role of the Eurocity as a platform for securing funding;
- iv. Political will;
- v. Participation of local stakeholders;
- vi. Building trust among the entities involved; and
- vii. The existence of prior socio-cultural ties.

Case study

In the Iberian Peninsula, there are seven formally established Eurocities (Jurado-Almonte & Pazos-García, 2020; Lois, Cairo & Limón, 2022) and two others in an advanced process of formation, making a total of nine initiatives. On the border between Spain and France, the first and only Eurocity along this boundary is located (López Trigal & López-Fernández, 2021; Trillo-Santamaría, Deco & Paül, 2025). The remaining eight—six formally established and two in process—are found along the Spanish–Portuguese border (Fig. 1), particularly concentrated in its northern sector (Trillo-Santamaría, Paül & Vila-Lage, 2021, 2025). The pioneer in this field was the Chaves–Verín Eurocity, created in 2007 and established as an EGTC in 2013 (Trillo-Santamaría, Lois & Paül, 2015). This was followed by Tui–Valença,



Fig. 1 Eurocities on the Spain–Portugal Border. *Source:* Authors' elaboration

Guadiana (initially known as Ayamonte, Vila Real de Santo António, and Castro Marim), Monção–Salvaterra, Badajoz–Elvas–Campo Maior, Cerveira–Tomiño, and Gateway to Europe. At present, progress is being made towards the establishment of two new Eurocities along the Minho River border: Foz do Minho and the Minho Eurocity (Lois, Cairo & Limón, 2022; Trillo-Santamaría, Paül & Vila-Lage, 2025).

As noted previously, Eurocities are a specific modality of cooperation between cities in the Iberian context, but they are not the only one. Along the Spanish–Portuguese border, there are other forms

of cross-border urban cooperation, such as the Eixo Atlântico (Atlantic Axis), which operates as an association of municipalities within the urban system of the Galicia–Northern Portugal Euroregion; the Triângulo Urbano Ibérico Rayano (TRIURBIR), which brings together the Spanish cities of Plasencia and Cáceres with Castelo Branco and Portalegre in Portugal; the CENCYL Network of Cities, which is composed of Salamanca, Valladolid, and Ciudad Rodrigo in Castilla y León (Spain), and Aveiro, Coimbra, Figueira da Foz, Guarda, and Viseu in Portugal.

Gateway to Europe Eurocity EGTC

In February 2023, the Gateway to Europe European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation Eurocity (in Portuguese, *Agrupamento Europeu de Cooperação Territorial Eurocidade Porta da Europa*) was officially registered, marking the formal establishment of the Eurocity. The project had begun in 2019 and was publicly presented on 1 July 2020, a date chosen to coincide with the reopening of the border during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lois, Cairo & Limón, 2022). This cross-border cooperation structure covers the stretch of the Spanish–Portuguese border that separates Salamanca province (Spain) and Guarda district (Portugal). The Gateway to Europe EGTC (GEE EGTC) is composed of four members: the municipalities of Almeida (Portugal), Fuentes de Oñoro (Spain), and Ciudad Rodrigo (Spain), together with the parish (freguesia)² of Vilar Formoso, which belongs to the municipality of Almeida (Fig. 2). The EGTC headquarters is located in the Alfândega de Vilar Formoso, on Portuguese territory.

The founding document of the GEE EGTC sets out 26 objectives, mainly focused on boosting the local economy, creating jobs, and tackling depopulation through investment, support for entrepreneurship, and improvements in infrastructure. Other objectives include reinforcing cross-border identity—with initiatives such as the Eurocitizen card and Euro citizenship—, improving labour mobility—including the recognition of cross-border worker status—, and

² In Portugal, although their demographic, economic, and administrative weight is usually limited, the freguesias have their own governing bodies and take part in municipal administration.

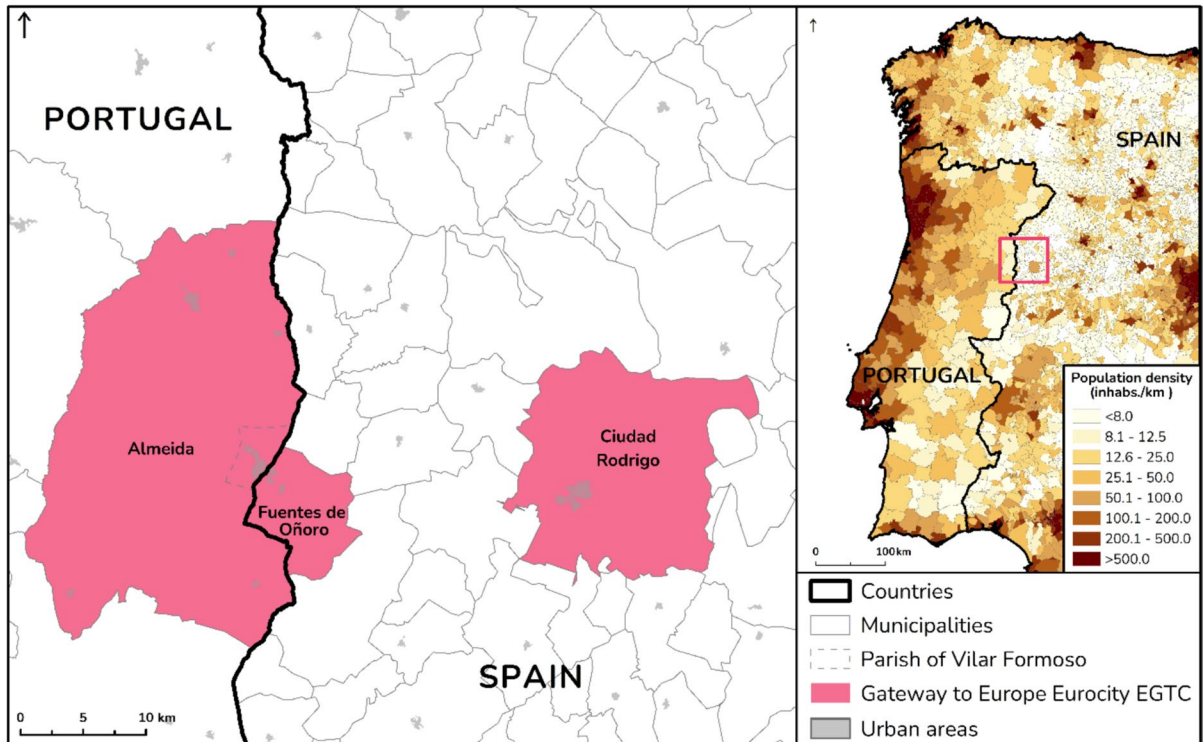


Fig. 2 Map of the Gateway to Europe Eurocity EGTC. *Source:* Authors' elaboration

promoting joint tourism initiatives. Additional goals address sustainability, digitalisation, and administrative cooperation.

The GEE EGTC is located in one of the least populated areas of the Spanish–Portuguese border (Hortelano & Martín, 2024) and of the Iberian Peninsula as a whole (Font, 2023). It is a rural and peripheral space, making it especially vulnerable and in need of specific attention (Font, 2023). Since the mid-twentieth century, this area has undergone continuous population decline. In particular, the 1960s witnessed a massive exodus towards other European countries, especially France, as well as to the Iberian coastal regions. This loss has persisted and been further aggravated by the outmigration of young people towards nearby university cities or major metropolitan centres such as Lisbon, Porto, Barcelona, or Madrid (Hortelano & Martín, 2024). The recent arrival of international migrants and neo-rurals (Tirado et al., 2022) is far from compensating for the accumulated effects of these dynamics, and does not counterbalance the processes of ageing, masculinisation, and loss of dynamism affecting this borderland.

The GEE EGTC covers an area of 816 km² and, in 2023, had 18,529 inhabitants. Overall, the population density is 22.7 inhabitants/km². However, there are significant differences among the three municipalities. Although Almeida accounts for almost two-thirds of the total surface area—reflecting the size differences between Portuguese and Spanish municipalities, which are themselves heterogeneous—, it hosts just over 30% of the GEE EGTC's population. Within Almeida, the main settlement is Vilar Formoso, the border parish that participates directly in the Eurocity, with 1,791 residents in 2021. Ciudad Rodrigo concentrates more than 60% of the total population, standing out as the main urban centre in southwestern Salamanca. Fuentes de Oñoro, the smallest of the three, has just over one thousand inhabitants but is notable for the urban continuity between its municipal seat and Vilar Formoso (Fig. 2).

One characteristic of the GEE EGTC is the absence of territorial continuity, since other municipalities lie between Fuentes de Oñoro and Ciudad Rodrigo and are not part of the structure (Fig. 2). The urban centre of Ciudad Rodrigo is nearly 25 km in a

straight line from the border, and even farther from other parts of the municipality. The distance by road between Almeida's municipal seat and that of Ciudad Rodrigo is nearly 46 km, with an estimated driving time of about 35 min. Meanwhile, Vilar Formoso and Fuentes de Oñoro display continuous development along the former Spain–Portugal road. As López Trigal (2017) notes, these were still small villages in the late nineteenth century, which gradually grew due to their border location. More recently, however, this area has been significantly affected by the construction of a highway bypass, which diverts traffic from the old road and has caused a marked decline in local commerce and hospitality in both Vilar Formoso and Fuentes de Oñoro.

This borderland is also of great historical significance, as seen in the defensive fortifications of Almeida and Ciudad Rodrigo, and as the site of key episodes such as the Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro during the Peninsular War or the role of this border crossing during the Second World War, when it enabled the arrival of numerous refugees into Portugal.³ At present, the area is notable within the Transports Internationaux Routiers (TIR) system, as it lies on the Aveiro–Irún route, which connects Portugal with France and the rest of the EU. The Vilar Formoso–Fuentes de Oñoro crossing registers the highest average daily traffic of heavy vehicles along the entire Portuguese–Spanish border, representing 20.6% of the total. It also supports a significant flow of cross-border workers, although in much smaller numbers than along the Minho River border between Galicia (Spain) and northern Portugal, where most Eurocities are concentrated.

Nevertheless, the GEE EGTC is not the only cross-border cooperation initiative in this area (Manero, 2012). Some of its local authorities are also involved in projects such as the Consortium of Walled Cross-Border Cities (Almeida and Ciudad Rodrigo), the Transfrontier Association of Municipalities of the Raya Seca, the Beira Interior Norte–Salamanca Province Working Community, the

Transfrontier Association of Iberian Heritage Cities, or the Luso-Spanish Permanent Table. In addition, the Duero–Douro EGTC is also active in this region, involving numerous local entities, including municipalities adjacent to those belonging to the Eurocity, although none of the current members of the GEE EGTC are part of it.

Methodology

The study follows a single-case design focused on the GEE EGTC, selected due to its recent creation and its location in a sparsely populated and peripheral area of the Spanish–Portuguese border. This makes it a particularly relevant case for understanding the challenges and opportunities of cross-border cooperation in rural contexts. This research adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews, with the aim of understanding the perspectives that key interviewees hold about the GEE EGTC and cross-border cooperation in the study area. This is a versatile research method that has been widely employed in the social sciences in recent decades (Kvale, 2011) and, more specifically, in the field of Geography (Hitchings & Latham, 2020; Morange & Schmoll, 2016; Winchester & Rofe, 2016). The interviews followed the methodological considerations outlined by Valentine (2005) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

In December 2024, a total of 15 interviews were conducted in the border area where the Eurocity is located. The interviewees are grouped into three main categories: local political representatives ($n=6$), civil society representatives ($n=5$), and technical staff ($n=4$). In some cases, they are affiliated with organizations on one or the other side of the border; however, no distinction was made between countries. Frequently, factors such as place of birth, personal and professional relationships, or daily mobility make it difficult to assign individuals exclusively to one country or the other. The selection of interviewees was based on contacting all accessible individuals with relevant information. Once the process began, the snowball technique was used (Valentine, 2005), whereby one contact facilitates access to another.

Interviews provide the opportunity to approach what happens “out there” from the perspective of the interviewee or from “within” the process under study (Kvale, 2011). The ideas that emerge from these

³ In Vilar Formoso stands the Vilar Formoso Fronteira da Paz (Vilar Formoso Peace Border) museum, dedicated to remembering the many people who crossed into Portugal at this point, especially during the Second World War. The name Fronteira da Paz was, in fact, one of the designations considered for this Eurocity.

conversations allow researchers to access the complex logics underlying actions developed in the territories (Di Méo & Buléon, 2005). Interviews can be conceived as goal-oriented conversations (Lune & Berg, 2017); however, their development requires prior preparation and rigorous planning (Dunn, 2010).

A flexible interview guide was used, containing open-ended questions that served as a reference for addressing the main topics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach made it possible to structure the interview into broad thematic blocks, moving from simpler to more complex issues, in order to cover all aspects of interest and allow for comparison across interviews (Valentine, 2005). At the same time, the flexibility of this format enabled adjustments in the sequence of questions depending on the specific dynamics of each interview (Jennings, 2005; Valentine, 2005).

The first block focused on basic information about the interviewee, in order to build trust and create a relaxed atmosphere for discussing subsequent topics. The second block addressed territorial perceptions, with questions about the study area and its evolution. The third sought to identify the institutions and actors operating in the territory. The fourth block focused on cross-border cooperation, aiming to capture the interviewees' views on relations across the border. Finally, the fifth block included questions directly related to the GEE EGTC.

This sequence, which moves from simpler to more complex topics, follows the structure proposed by Dunn (2010). However, every interview is different (Valentine, 2005), and in practice, with the exception of the first block, the sequence of topics varies from one case to another. It is the interviewer's responsibility to redirect the conversation when it deviates too far from the research topic (Flick, 2007). Likewise, the language used in each interview is flexible and must be adapted by the interviewer (Lune & Berg, 2017). The goal is to strike a balance between following the planned themes and not interrupting the natural flow of the interview (Valentine, 2005), since the foundation of this technique is listening (Seidman, 2006).

The interviews had an average duration of 40 min and, with the interviewees' consent, were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts were processed with a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The data were

organized through open coding, which enabled analysis, reduction, and abstraction of the collected material (Crang, 2005). Progressively, more reflexive codes were developed, allowing for the construction of a semiotic clustering (Crang, 2005) that underpins the results section. Anonymity was guaranteed, so verbatim quotations are accompanied by a numerical code (E1–E15) and a descriptor indicating the interviewee's category (local political representative [LPR], civil society representative [CSR], or technical staff [TS]). Although all the quotations included in the article appear in English, the interviews were conducted in Portuguese and Spanish.

The research project was positively evaluated by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Santiago de Compostela, complying with the experimental protocol and with all required ethical standards.

Results

“From the border between the two countries, I think this is the poorest area” (E4_CSR)

According to the interviewees, the territory of the GEE EGTC is marked by two key aspects: on the one hand, depopulation and its associated effects, which have intensified in recent decades, and on the other hand, its border condition, which has profoundly shaped the lives of the population in the immediate surroundings.

In this context, most agree that “the fundamental characteristic is that we are in a zone of absolute decline” (E5_TS). A pessimistic outlook is widespread, with references to the area as a “poor region” (E2_LPR) or a “disadvantaged area” (E4_CSR). Interviewees explained that they have witnessed its progressive deterioration and foresee major challenges for its future. They stressed that depopulation is the main issue, a process common to the rural interior of the Iberian Peninsula, but one that is felt more acutely in areas closer to the border.

When elaborating on their perceptions of the GEE EGTC territory, the interviewees highlighted the profound changes that have taken place around the Vilar Formoso–Fuentes de Oñoro border crossing. From a nostalgic perspective, interviewees noted that until the mid-1990s this border zone displayed a remarkable socioeconomic dynamism, greater than that of the

neighbouring areas. They believe that the introduction of free movement between Portugal and Spain in 1995 had a strong impact on Vilar Formoso and Fuentes de Oñoro.

Border controls and the associated economic activity “generated a lot of wealth” (E14_LPR), fostering the emergence of numerous small businesses and a significant number of local jobs. However, these activities typical of the border have since disappeared or, as with logistics centres, relocated to cities such as Guarda or Salamanca. Local commerce was also strongly affected and has been in continuous decline ever since. This process has been further aggravated by the recent opening of the highway bypass, which diverts traffic away from the urban centres of Vilar Formoso and Fuentes de Oñoro and, according to interviewees, has further diminished the importance of these towns located right at the border.

“In the end, it’s just one village together with another village” (E6_TS)

The interviewees consider that the population living in the GEE EGTC territory shares certain characteristics: “I think the border line is more political and less sociological, many things bring us together” (E3_LPR). Still, many pointed out that differences exist on either side of the border: “very similar, but very different, culturally also very different” (E11_TS). In this regard, they emphasized the greater awareness among the Portuguese population of what happens in Spain, as well as their ability to speak Spanish, something that does not occur in the opposite direction: “I think if you ask in Spain who governs Portugal, nobody knows” (E6_TS).

According to the interviews, basic commercial motivations constitute the main reason that currently defines relations between the two sides. Small savings in grocery shopping, refuelling, or differences in holidays and shopping hours explain many of the cross-border movements. The opening of the border was decisive because, although these exchanges already existed, when crossing the border “there was always that fear” (E14_LPR).

A shared history was also mentioned, with examples such as the fortifications of Almeida, Ciudad Rodrigo, or Aldea del Obispo. At the most local level, however, the role of smuggling was especially significant, described as the economic engine for many

years and an activity in which a large part of the local population was involved: “[T]here is no one in this area who doesn’t have a family member who did it...” (E1_LPR). During the pandemic, with the closure of the border, some clandestine commercial transactions took place, recalling what had happened decades earlier.

In recent years, beyond these dynamics, there has been “a greater willingness to do things together” (E8_CSR). Examples include coordinated events and activities such as a Christmas market, a music festival, talks, or cross-border running races, some of which even take place right on the border.

“I fear that the Eurocity will remain on paper” (E8_CSR)

The GEE EGTC received numerous criticisms from the interviewees, many of whom admitted that they know nothing about this initiative beyond occasional mentions in the press after its creation, and defined it as a project that “is dead” (E5_TS) or “is stalled” (E2_LPR). Most could not identify any activity led by the Eurocity and doubted this would change in the future: “I don’t see anything being materialised” (E15_LPR). They also pointed out that the local population not only did not participate in its launch, but that many people are not even aware of its existence. Some argued that it is an initiative that has not gone beyond the realm of local politics, and that it should be oriented differently: “These kinds of things need to be a bit lower, closer to the citizens” (E7_CSR).

Regarding priority areas of action, interviewees linked to strictly border-related issues mentioned education, health, and employment. They considered it necessary to introduce more flexibility into the different systems in order to improve residents’ quality of life. They also recalled the pandemic and the difficulties they experienced during the period of border closure, expressing interest in the figure of the cross-border worker as an issue to be addressed. In addition, they viewed the Eurocities along the Galicia–Portugal border as examples to follow.

From another perspective, the GEE EGTC was seen as a potential instrument to attract economic activity, specifically in the logistics and industrial sectors: “Industrial land and an innovation centre, those are the two strategies we have on the table” (E3_LPR), or “[The GEE EGTC] can cover issues

related to business development, industry, and so on” (E9_TS). Other aspects, they argued, are already addressed through other cross-border cooperation structures. The Cross-Border Consortium of Walled Cities, composed of Ciudad Rodrigo and Almeida, was the most frequently mentioned. This initiative was considered a success, having secured funding for numerous projects. The Consortium was described as an instrument for channeling the joint tourist promotion of these municipalities, attending fairs, and presenting themselves as a single destination. Therefore, incorporating tourism into the GEE EGTC was seen as “a waste of time” (E6_TS). Other cross-border initiatives such as the CENCYL Cities Network or the International Association of Entrepreneurs of the Central Iberian Border were also mentioned. Furthermore, the possibility of including Ciudad Rodrigo in the World Heritage nomination known as the “Fortified Towns of the Raia,” initiated by Almeida, Valença, and Marvão, was highlighted: “In the end, the key is always tourism” (E13_LPR).

In any case, there seemed to be some consensus that the GEE EGTC could serve as a platform for sharing services, specifically between Vilar Formoso and Fuentes de Oñoro. It was also mentioned as an opportunity to reopen major territorial debates, such as the restoration of the railway connection between the two countries.

“Since the elections, there has not yet been a meeting with the new...” (E14_LPR)

The causes of the GEE EGTC’s inoperability are varied, according to the interviewees. First, they acknowledged the complexity of local politics, derived from the lack of coordination between municipal elections in the two countries, which makes it difficult to establish stable relationships between both sides. They also noted that the previous municipal governments “were the ones who had the knowledge and were the ones pushing it forward” (E15_LPR). Added to this were the differences between the political parties governing the various entities that make up the Eurocity, as well as internal disputes within those same parties. The recent political instability of Portugal’s central government was also mentioned as a factor complicating local issues, such as proper budgetary planning.

Another frequently cited issue was the absence of a body to lead and steer the GEE EGTC, with some pointing out that “this push, well, logically, it has to come, let’s be honest, from Portugal. It has to come, because in the end it was created under its legal form, with its headquarters in Portugal, and so...” (E3_LPR). Some interviewees suggested that, since the Cross-Border Consortium of Walled Cities is headquartered in Ciudad Rodrigo, the GEE EGTC should serve as a counterweight.

In any case, the interviewees agreed that staffing the Eurocity with technical personnel would be a necessary step for its functioning and for applying to different cross-border cooperation projects, since the municipalities alone lack the capacity to do so: “I would give it resources so that it had its own staff, and that staff would then drive forward Eurocity activities” (E9_TS).

The very composition of the GEE EGTC was also a source of controversy. Interviewees considered that there was a duality within the Eurocity: Vilar Formoso–Fuentes de Oñoro, where daily relations are frequent; and, by contrast, Almeida–Ciudad Rodrigo, larger urban centres further from the border with different dynamics. The lack of territorial continuity was also criticized. Many suggested expanding the Eurocity to integrate cities such as Salamanca or Guarda, thereby giving it a greater critical mass: “The Eurocity has been set up in an area with very little population, in a place where there are no universities, nothing at all” (E8_CSR). On several occasions the idea of a Euroregion was even raised: “And then there’s a leap, I don’t know... For that you should just create a Euroregion: Salamanca Province–Central Portugal” (E6_TS).

Despite this, some also believed it was better to start small and, if it worked, expand later, since, from the outset: “A very large area becomes ungovernable” (E11_TS).

“Cross-border cooperation creates work, it requires an effort of communication, of human relations, of personal relations... but it also bears fruit” (E9_TS)

Beyond the GEE EGTC or other parallel initiatives, interviewees also reflected on cross-border cooperation more generally, identifying obstacles and areas for improvement. In nearly every interview, talking about cross-border cooperation meant pointing

to administrative or legal problems that hinder the implementation of projects or negatively affect the quality of life of people living in these areas:

It's unbelievable, how after so many years, being in Europe, we're still not Europeans. We still have borders, because we have legal borders, we have administrative borders, we have bureaucratic borders, and those are almost impossible to overcome. The only borders we don't have are human ones. (E7_CSR)

They recognized that progress had mainly been made in cultural, social, or sporting activities, but that in areas such as education or health, the population was reluctant due to the bureaucratic hurdles involved. In this context, some voices defended informal practices as a more direct and effective path: "Yes, it can be done now without formalities, I think it's not worth going through formalization, because then we'll end up creating rules that..." (E14_LPR).

The interviewees agreed that cross-border cooperation largely depends on the personal commitment of those who drive it. They mentioned the difficulties even in registering a cross-border association, but emphasized that in certain areas solutions are eventually found: "I always separate how people work from how administrations work" (E5_TS).

The different territorial organisation of Portugal and Spain, as well as the differing weight of municipalities on either side of the border, were also cited as obstacles to cooperation. For instance, it was noted that in Portugal "contact with top-level politicians is much closer" (E15_LPR), or that Castilla y León is larger than the whole of Portugal.

The Interreg programme occupied a prominent place in the interviews. Its importance was recognized, but criticisms were also raised. Interviewees questioned the expansion of eligible territories, arguing that "the money for the border belongs to the border" (E6_TS). At the same time they considered co-financing requirements excessive for local entities, whose financial capacity does not allow them to invest under the terms required. Added to this was the lack of technical staff, which limits the ability to work continuously on these programmes.

Discussion

This research is framed within the broad literature on Eurocities along the Spanish-Portuguese border,

which also represent a particular case in the Iberian Peninsula (Trillo-Santamaría, Paül & Vila-Lage, 2021). In the context of economic and social opening of the EU's internal borders, these interurban cooperation figures were inspired by consolidated models such as Eurodistricts or Eurometropolises (Sohn, 2010, 2022), where the aim was to strengthen functional and spatial integration across state boundaries. Thus, within the process of European integration, the permeability of borders encouraged the relevant authorities to incorporate cross-border cooperation into their territorial strategies and to establish agreements and structures for that purpose (Noferini et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, significant differences can be observed between these types of cross-border urban areas. While Eurodistricts or Eurometropolises—such as Lille-Kortrijk–Tournai or Strasbourg–Ortenau—generally comprise large, densely populated and spatially continuous metropolitan regions, Eurocities are often characterised by smaller and discontinuous settlements embedded in rural environments (Medeiros, 2024). As a result, their capacity to engage in complex domains such as urban planning, mobility management or environmental sustainability tends to be more limited, leading them to prioritise symbolic, cultural, or tourism-related initiatives instead. From this perspective, Eurocities can be seen as a distinct subtype within the broader European landscape of cross-border urban cooperation—more modest in scale and resources, but equally significant in terms of experimenting with new governance models and fostering cross-border identity at the local level, in line with Lois, Cairo & Limón (2022) and Valadas (2024).

However, the project under study has not yet had a promising start, raising concerns that it may repeat discouraging experiences such as that of the Basque Eurocity (Trillo-Santamaría, Amado & Paül, 2025). That said, it is complex to establish analogies between different Eurocities, since the label covers very diverse cases in terms of demographic size as well as morphological characteristics. Indeed, this case study shows the difficulty of integrating into a single cross-border cooperation framework territorial realities that are diverse and even geographically distant. In this context, it is also important to critically examine certain normative attempts to conceptualize the Eurocity. For example, *Law 10/2021 of 9 March, regulating*

Galicia's external action and development cooperation, defines it as “the agreement between contiguous local entities, with historical, social and cultural relations, and belonging to two different states of the European Union” (Comunidad Autónoma de Galicia, 2021). This definition, however, has clear limitations, as it does not correspond to the reality of many Eurocities. In practice, several of them are not physically contiguous but are instead separated by considerable geographical distance.

The findings reveal that the relationship between Vilar Formoso and Fuentes de Oñoro is intense and everyday, as López Trigal (2017) pointed out, and is grounded in a shared identity and symbolic or emotional capital linked to the border and its memories. This situation resonates with Buursink (2001), Ehlers (2001), Garrard and Mikhailova (2019), Mikhailova and Garrard (2021), and MOT (2010), who emphasize the importance of physical continuity for understanding a cross-border urban area.

By contrast, the results show that towns such as Ciudad Rodrigo maintain links with the borderland, but within a different dynamic, closer to a Euroregional logic than to the idea of a Eurocity conceived as a cohesive space. This view aligns more closely with the approaches of Bae (2003), Alegría (2009), Chilla et al. (2010), or Sohn (2010, 2012, 2014, 2022), opening the door to reflect on the territorial scope of the Eurocity and the possibility of reorganizing cross-border cooperation in this area.

In this regard, some interviewees suggest that a first-level structure of strictly local cooperation could be organized by the municipalities of Fuentes de Oñoro and Almeida—which could retain the Eurocity label. At a second level, a regional structure could be formed, integrating Ciudad Rodrigo as part of Salamanca province on one side, and the District of Guarda on the other, thereby giving the regional structure the necessary demographic critical mass. The coalescence of these two levels could define a multiscale cooperation framework in the form of a matryoshka, in Durà's (2023) terms, where each structure complements the other through a set of strategic axes in line with their competencies.

Taken together, this case study empirically challenges the very definition of Eurocity, as it combines within its territory the two prevailing approaches: the existence of an urban continuity interrupted only by the former customs facilities (Vilar Formoso–Fuentes

de Oñoro), and the inclusion of more distant towns that respond to regional logics. Both cases fit the two categories established by MOT (2006): dense and continuous urban clusters, and cross-border urban networks. However, the case of the GEE EGTC also shows that, by including entire municipalities, what is presented as a Eurocity is, in reality, a predominantly rural space with low population density. This underscores the need to rethink the current concept of Eurocity and to consider new figures that may be better suited to such contexts. In this sense, the findings support the difficulties in conceptualizing the term (Trillo-Santamaría & Vila-Lage, 2021; Trillo-Santamaría & Paül, 2020), as well as its application to very diverse realities (Paül et al., 2017).

The results also show the ambivalent interpretation of the effects of the free movement established in 1995 between Spain and Portugal depending on the scale considered. At the local level, the removal of the border barrier (Durand & Perrin, 2017; Noferrini et al., 2019; Rumford, 2006) did not translate into benefits but had negative consequences. The end of smuggling and the closure of customs posts meant the disappearance of a significant source of employment. Cases such as Vilar Formoso and Fuentes de Oñoro illustrate that border opening does not always imply direct benefits for border territories and, under certain circumstances, may even consolidate peripheral positions.

It is also important to note that, despite border opening, state-national influences and resistances have not disappeared, as evidenced by the variety of obstacles identified by interviewees. In line with Jacobs (2016) and Durand and Decoville (2018), legal barriers stemming from divergent regulatory frameworks were observed, alongside political obstacles linked to unsynchronized electoral cycles and internal disputes, and institutional obstacles related to the perception of unequal representation among the entities leading the project. These findings reinforce the relevance of the qualitative methodology employed to diagnose the current situation (Valentine, 2005, among others).

Similarly, the limitations highlighted shape the thematic orientation of possible future actions. “Soft” cooperation, linked to cultural, sporting, or social events and tourism promotion, is much easier to implement, in line with Trillo-Santamaría & Vila-Lage (2021) and Duque & Carvalho (2023). In this

respect, although the GEE EGTC has not spearheaded any such activities, interviewees repeatedly mentioned the partial participation of some of its member entities through bilateral relations—such as the parish of Vilar Formoso or the municipality of Fuentes de Oñoro—in certain sociocultural events. Nonetheless, regarding the thematic areas that the structure should prioritize in the future, there is a clear divergence between the views of those with closer ties to the immediate borderland and those located further away. While the borderland population prioritizes shared basic services, political authorities tend to frame their discourse around tourism or industrial development. This reflects the disconnection between the population and the project, and the limited participation, showing how far the GEE EGTC is from the bottom-up approach that should characterize Eurocities according to their conceptualization.

This idea reinforces the perception that we are dealing with a cross-border entity that exists mainly “on paper” and is disconnected from people’s daily lives (Paasi, 2001, p. 14). This is reflected in the absence of symbolic or communicative elements promoted by the GEE EGTC to strengthen a Eurocity identity. In fact, there is not even a website or identifying logo. This lack of impetus is especially concerning in its early years, when a foundation should have been laid to ensure its consolidation and future sustainability. The interviews reveal that Galician-Portuguese Eurocities, particularly Chaves–Verín, have served as a reference for the development of the GEE EGTC. The case of Chaves–Verín was a pioneer as an EGTC, launching initiatives such as the Eurocitizenship card (Lois, Cairo & Limón, 2022; Trillo-Santamaría et al., 2015). Although in some cases that initial momentum has diminished, it is paradoxical that in the case of the GEE EGTC it never even materialised.

The only identifiable success factors in the GEE EGTC are pre-existing sociocultural ties and an initial political will, which seems to have dissipated amid municipal political changes. Conversely, other factors identified in the literature as determinants of Eurocity success (Trillo-Santamaría & Vila-Lage, 2021; Castanho et al., 2019; Jurado-Almonte & Pazos-García, 2017; Trillo-Santamaría et al., 2021)—such as strategic planning, communication, citizen participation, and institutional coordination—are absent in this case.

Conclusion

The analysis of the GEE EGTC illustrates the coexistence of two distinct territorial logics within the same institutional framework. On the one hand, there is the everyday cross-border life between Vilar Formoso and Fuentes de Oñoro, which reflects the essence of a Eurocity. On the other, the broader and more administrative relationship linking Almeida and Ciudad Rodrigo follows a different dynamic. This duality highlights both the adaptability and the conceptual fragility of the Eurocity model when applied to rural settings.

At the same time, the case exposes the broader tensions and contradictions that characterise cross-border cooperation within the GEE EGTC. The Eurocity was conceived as an instrument to foster development and counter depopulation, yet the findings reveal a marked gap between its institutional ambition and its practical implementation. So far, the project has remained largely formal, lacking the human and material resources necessary to translate its objectives into concrete action. However, the interviews reveal strong sociocultural ties and everyday cross-border interactions, particularly in the Vilar Formoso–Fuentes de Oñoro area, that could provide a genuine foundation for more meaningful cooperation if adequately supported.

This research is limited to the case of the GEE EGTC, but it would be valuable to conduct a more detailed analysis of other local cross-border initiatives, especially in rural areas, to move beyond the urban-oriented approaches implicit in the term Eurocity. Moreover, the qualitative approach employed has provided insight into interviewees’ views on the Eurocity (Cope & Hay, 2021), although it would also be useful to incorporate quantitative techniques to measure the population’s knowledge of this structure and to evaluate the impact of Interreg funds in the study area.

Overall, the GEE EGTC appears, so far, more as another attempt to leverage the territory to access European funding than as a genuine local cooperation project. As Medina (2012) already warned, cooperation on the Spanish–Portuguese border has sometimes been sustained more by fund distribution than by a shared vision. Up to now, the Eurocity has not played a significant role in halting depopulation and

socio-economic decline (Cairo et al., 2024; Castanho et al., 2017).

Its activation is therefore essential, both to promote projects that improve the quality of life of the local population in this border area and, at the very least, to make visible the existing problems, such as the lack of rail connection, in order to avoid, as one interviewee warned, that “[T]hese territories end up being forgotten...” (E9_TS).

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Declarations

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