

European Laboratory of Excellence – Exzellenzlabor Europa 2025

Saarland University | Villa Vigoni

European inequalities across borders: dividing and integrating processes

The workshop focuses on the persistent and complex inequalities across European borders, particularly in cross-border and peripheral regions. These inequalities, intensified by recent political, ecological, and economic crises, challenge the European Union's long-term and mantra-like objectives of economic, social and territorial cohesion. Contributions are invited to explore the paradox of integrating and dividing processes, examining the socio-economic, spatial, and political dynamics at play. Contributions should address the multifaceted nature of inequalities, considering broader measures of well-being and convergence beyond traditional econometric indicators. We invite contributions from various disciplines such as sociology, geography, political science, planning, and regional studies on – but not limited to – the following questions:

- How have dimensions of inequalities across borders developed in Europe?
- How do inequalities in cross-border regions differ from national or European inequalities?
- What are the social, spatial, economic, political, and historical processes that contribute to division or integration in cross-border contexts and other peripheral regions?
- How can situated and comparative perspectives contribute to understanding inequalities across borders from a European perspective?

The ongoing political, ecological and economic poly-crises and the temporary re-introduction of inner-European border controls have brought inequalities back on to the agenda of policymakers and academia. The re-emergence of inequality as a political and academic concept is deeply linked to the current state of Europe, and in particular, the European Union (EU). Currently, a certain paradox can be observed between social, economic and spatial integrating processes and dividing forces, reinforcing differences between regions. These dynamics particularly express themselves in cross-border regions, inner peripheries and other marginalized, so called 'lagging' regions in Europe (Widuto 2019). This persistence of European inequalities stands in contrast to the long-term goals of EU policies, which intend to enhance European cohesion through financial funding programs and legal instruments. Since the 2000s, planning research and regional studies have stressed regional disparities and path dependencies of unequal development, mainly from infrastructural and economic perspectives. However, few scholars address spatial integration across borders beyond econometric indicators and the mantra-like metaphor of economic, social and territorial cohesion. At the local and regional scale, scholars from various disciplines observe different expressions of social and spatial disparities, due to polarization, marginalization, and peripheralization processes across borders. While scholars have addressed inequalities between central and

peripheral regions (Hacker, 2020) as well as in local, urban contexts (Fritsch et al. 2024), few studies address the complex entanglements, processes and practices of inequalities in cross-border regions.

The European Laboratory of Excellence addresses inequalities across European borders that continue to characterize cross-border and other peripheral regions. In particular the European Commission has emphasized the importance of inner-European border regions for European cohesion, as they state that „Border regions are places where the European integration process should be felt most positively“ (EC 2017, 3). Border regions receive particular support from EU cohesion and structural policies that have been steadily expanded since the 1990s. These funding schemes, such as INTERREG, are intended to initiate transformation processes through which border regions not only integrate as economic areas, but also improve the quality of life of the population. However, the long-term effects of these measures on regional inequalities are difficult to assess. Besides, legal instruments such as the European cross-border mechanism (ECBM) are intended to facilitate cooperation and joint projects and thus also contribute to the coalescence of border regions. In light of the continuous refinement of financial and legal funding instruments for cross-border regional integration, failed integrating measures and complex border regional dynamics such as growing inner- and inter-regional inequalities tend to receive less attention.

Thereby, we do not limit the workshop’s perspective to dividing and integrating processes in border regions. Cohesion can take various spatial forms which go beyond the spatial development of a region understood as a territorial entity (Atkinson & Pacchi 2020). Moreover, regional disparities can not only be measured in terms of socio-econometric indicators, such as the Gini coefficient or others measures of prosperity (McCann 2020, IMF 2022), but also in terms of “real economic convergence” (Jakubowski & Wojcik 2024) or “well-being” (Lenzi & Fedeli 2024). Regarding social cohesion, EU policies can also lead to increasing societal divisions and cementation of existing inequalities (Demeterova et al., 2020; Durand et al., 2017). Therefore, communities in border regions may encounter unique challenges shaped by the realities of cross-border interactions in daily life. Political integration in cross-border regions, moreover, needs to go beyond the establishment of formal political and administrative committees and involve local citizens (Ulrich 2021).

Overall, the workshop addresses European inequalities from a multidisciplinary perspective, emphasizing the dynamics and paradoxes of sociological, geographical, political processes and everyday practices. The workshop thereby addresses scientific debates on European cohesion in sociology, geography and regional and planning studies and focuses on the concepts of (cross-border) inequality and cohesion. The aim of the workshop is to examine inner-European border regions and their various dimensions of cross-border inequalities, in order to decipher the complex interdependences and entanglements between coexisting inequalities as effects or conditions of integration processes across (national) borders in Europe.

We invite contributions on – but not limited to – the following questions:

- How have (dimensions of) inequalities across borders developed in Europe?
- How do inequalities in cross-border regions differ from national and European inequalities?

- What are social, spatial, economic, political, historical processes and practices that contribute to division or integration in/of cross-border contexts and other peripheral regions?
- How can situated and comparative perspectives contribute to understanding the inequalities across borders from a European perspective?

The workshop is part of a series of the 'European Laboratory of Excellence' and is funded by the Cluster for European Research at Saarland University, in cooperation with the UniGR-Center for Border Studies. The workshop will take place from October 8 - 11, 2025 at Villa Vigoni (German-Italian Center for European Dialogue) on Lake Como in Italy. Participation is free of charge. Accommodation and parts of the travel costs for participants will be covered. There will be the possibility to publish the results of the workshop in an edited volume.

We look forward to the submission of abstracts (500 words) by March 31, 2025, via email to ulla.connor@uni-saarland.de and carola.fricke@uni-saarland.de.



CEUS – Cluster für Europaforschung



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