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Cross-border cooperation central to the European project

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When you live in the French region called Alsace, you often cross into Germany without giving it a second thought. For a number of workers who commute across the border, it's even part of their daily routine. People also go there to do their shopping, to attend a concert, for a weekend away, or to seek medical treatment on the other side of the Rhine. This border, whose history has so often been marked by suffering, has, over time, become a place of passage rather than conflict. This is what Europe means to an Alsatian: not simply a treaty or an institution, but a way of life.

I was born in Alsace, I grew up there, I speak Alsatian, and I have devoted a large part of my life as an elected representative to this borderland, to which I am deeply attached. First as mayor of Gries, then in the Senate and as vice-chair of the Committee on European Affairs, but also as a regional councillor. These roles have taught me to view Europe from the perspective of the local council right up to the institutions in Strasbourg and Brussels. And it is this multifaceted perspective that I would like to share here. For Alsace, which has been alternately French and German, is not only a symbol of post-war reconciliation, but also of European integration, with Strasbourg at its heart. It serves as a model for cross-border cooperation.

COOPERATION ROOTED IN HISTORY

Alsace is bordered by two neighbours, Germany and Switzerland. Our ties with Germany are long-standing and deep-rooted: from the reconciliation initiated by Robert Schuman and Konrad Adenauer to the leadership duos that have shaped the construction of Europe – from Giscard d'Estaing and Schmidt to Kohl and Mitterrand, and on to Merkel and Sarkozy – the Franco-German partnership has long been the driving force behind Europe.

Our relations with Switzerland are also steeped in history; one of the most telling examples

is the EuroAirport in Basel-Mulhouse. Indeed, as early as 1945, in the aftermath of the war, France and Switzerland agreed on a joint project: the former would provide the land, whilst the latter would build the runways. Inaugurated the following year, this airport is the perfect example of a successful partnership between two nations – France and Switzerland – serving residents on both sides of the border without distinction.

This local cooperation is not limited to just two countries. At the heart of the Upper Rhine region, where French provinces, German Länder and Swiss cantons meet, a long-standing tradition of working together has resulted in robust structures. The Upper Rhine Conference brings together administrations and sub-national institutions from the three countries, whilst the Eurodistricts and local cross-border cooperation groups link neighbouring territories on both sides of the border on a day-to-day basis. The Rhine Council, for its part, is the region's political assembly. It was Adrien Zeller, then President of the Alsace Regional Council and a leading figure in cross-border cooperation, who chaired its inaugural session in 1998 at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Closer to the people, town twinning schemes have been forging bonds of friendship for decades. Gries, the town where I served as

mayor, has been twinned since 1979 with a German town bearing exactly the same name, Gries, in the Palatinate. Two towns, one name, two countries: there is no more apt illustration of what is both the simplest and the most profound aspect of cross-border cooperation. Behind this twinning lies a wish for collaboration and closer ties between our peoples, nurtured over the years.

DAILY REALITY

It is in this area that Alsace achieves its most tangible results. Mobility, managed by the Grand Est Region, provides a fine illustration of this. Rail links bring the two sides of the river closer together, and northern Alsace benefits directly from this, with lines connecting Strasbourg to Wissembourg and Neustadt, or Lauterbourg to Wörth and Karlsruhe. Further south, routes to Offenburg and Müllheim complete this network. Fare structures follow the same trend. Every summer, the 'Pass Jeune Grand Est Grenzenlos' allows young people under the age of 28 to travel freely for €29 a month on the regional networks of the Grand Est and three neighbouring German states: Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland. In 2026, this scheme was even extended to Switzerland. In return, young Germans and Swiss holders of this travel pass can use our regional network.

Healthcare provides another key example. The health crisis brought this home loud and clear: when intensive care units in Alsace were overwhelmed, patients were able to be transferred to hospitals in Germany and Switzerland. Cross-border cooperation, in those critical days, helped to save lives. In northern Alsace, the PAMINA Eurodistrict is working to bring hospitals closer together and coordinate healthcare provision; across the Upper Rhine region, the Three-Nation Health Competence Centre (TRISAN) extends this approach of providing a joint response to shared needs.

Having held municipal and inter-municipal positions in northern Alsace for many years, I know that it is at this level – the level of everyday life – that

cooperation truly comes into its own. It is built through ordinary actions, through encounters, projects and the services we learn to share. It is this habit of working together that makes cross-border cooperation a tangible reality in the lives of the people of Alsace.

JOINT CHALLENGES

The challenges that lie ahead – whether they concern adapting to climate change, the energy and industrial transitions, or the future of our young people – all share one common feature: they do not stop at the border.

Adapting to climate change calls for joint responses on both sides of the Rhine, whether it be to preserve our water resources, our forests or our biodiversity. Then there are the economic transitions: our industrial base, and our automotive sector in particular, is undergoing profound change, and it is together that we must support businesses and employees as they move towards the jobs of tomorrow. Finally, young people – who are the very future of this cooperation – must be able to carry on the work we have begun. To this end, proficiency in our neighbour's language and knowledge of their history are essential. This linguistic and cultural proximity is a precious asset that we must nurture and pass on. It is a major undertaking, and undoubtedly the most delicate one.

Bilingualism is now facing difficulties due to a shortage of teachers, whilst English is gaining ground on both sides of the border. We must adapt to this change by working together to find ways to continue passing on our neighbour's language to younger generations.

We do not face these challenges in isolation: they are shared, and it is precisely this that gives full meaning to the various structures I have mentioned.

In this regard, the European Union is making progress. The European [BRIDGEforEU](#) regulation, adopted in 2025, aims to make cross-border

cooperation smoother and more effective. From access to healthcare to the organisation of cultural or sporting events, daily life along the border is set to be simplified. France has therefore chosen to launch a pilot scheme on the Franco-German border, with one contact point per region, under the authority of the regional prefects. This is the sort of concrete progress our regions need.

Alsace, a borderland that has become a land of transit, bears witness every day to the challenges of cross-border cooperation. It is in this unique space, ultimately, that the Europe of everyday life is built and lived out: not in grand speeches, but in the ability of the two sides of the border to understand one another and move forward together. And from this perspective, cross-border cooperation has a bright future ahead of it.

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