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Firefighters across Frontiers: Two Fire Brigades Cooperating in the Dutch–German Borderland

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This article focuses on boundaries as symbolic constructs to overcome structural impediments to cooperation in a borderland constituted by two nation states – Germany and the Netherlands – that, from a global perspective, may be regarded as close cultural neighbours. Empirically, the vicissitudes of cross-border cooperation are analysed at the level of a Dutch and a German fire brigade in adjacent borderland villages. The diminishing visibility of borders does not necessarily lead to more openness, but gives rise to the emergence of socially constructed symbolical boundaries, which has major effects on issues of national identity and loyalty within organizations operating in trans-border spaces. Cultural differences can complicate processes of transnational coordination, harmonization, and negotiation. However, cooperation and trust, based on an affinity with a local culture in borderlands, may provide a more stable fundament for successful common ventures than do regulations enacted by state authorities. Addressing the question of how processes of transnationalization affect inter-organizational cooperation, this article describes and analyses the ways in which European integration, national bureaucracies and cultural similarities and differences form partly converging and partly conflicting forces in cooperative efforts in the Dutch–German borderland.

Key words: Firefighters; Inter-organizational Cooperation; Nation State versus Borderless World; Borderland; Symbolic Construction of Boundaries; European Integration

INTRODUCTION

In mainstream cross-cultural research in organizational studies, the concept of boundaries has served the analytical purpose of establishing a clear distinction between organizations and their environment. In Hofstede's (1991) widely appraised but also significantly criticized approach, cultural differences are classified as a contingency factor measuring objective distances between national groups and defining these distances as a constraint to cooperation *within* organizations. A resonance of Hofstede's approach can be found in many organizational studies addressing cooperation *between* organizations across national borders. In these studies, cultural differences are regarded as obstacles that threaten the performance of the organizations involved in such cooperative efforts and, therefore, have to be minimized (cf. Schein, 1985; Ruigrok and van Tulder, 1993).

In the ongoing debate about the issue of the relationship between national and organizational boundaries, the conceptualization is rather limited. It has been argued that processes of globalization are changing the relationship between nation states. Instead of being a structure

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of countries, the global order is a structure 'of organizations that overlap national boundaries and override state sovereignty' (Lewellen, 2002: 194–5). Much in this vein, the notion of organizations as stable and monolithic systems has given way to concepts of processes, networks and dynamic configurations of interests in recent approaches to cross-cultural management. It has become fashionable to speak of the 'blurring' of both organizational and national boundaries (cf. Hernes and Paulsen, 2003).

Visions of boundaryless organizations may reflect the euphoria exhibited by scholars maintaining that processes of globalization have challenged established national borders, a challenge that may result in a borderless world (cf. Appadurai, 1996; Huntington, 1996; Ohmae, 1990). All over the world, social, economic, political and cultural transformations put pressure on states to make their borders more permeable. However, it is questionable whether this implies the actual dismantling of state borders and the fusion of national societies and cultures. It seems that the increased permeability of state borders focuses mainly on the sphere of economic transactions, technology transfer and capital flows (Castells, 1996). Much in this vein, it is questionable whether boundaries defined by national cultural differences in and between organizations undergoing globalization simply evaporate. In a globalizing world in particular, national belonging may assume a potent role in the symbolic production of difference. It may constitute a symbolic resource that is actively mobilized by organizations and their members for the social goals of resistance (cf. Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003: 1089).

Questions pertaining to boundaries between nation states and organizations acquire an extra dimension if positioned in the geographic context of borderlands. Processes of state formation have created borderlands which have subsequently been 'stripped of their relevance with an overemphasis on the bounding and excluding practices of modern states' (Walker, 1999: 16). As a consequence, borders are seen as places of containment (Mitchell quoted in Walker, 1999: 16). However, with the exception of closed borders, state power is more concerned with regulating trans-border flows than with preventing them (Walker: 1999). As Anderson (1996) points out, borders are both institutions and processes. As institutions, borders provide a range of boundaries, which are important to states, including the real and symbolic enclosure of territory and citizenry. As processes, borders are instruments of state policy. Government policies at borders, and government policies regarding borders, promote national interests. While borders physically demarcate states and define their distinct identities, they are also sites for ongoing social and cultural exchange (Donnan and Wilson, 1999).

The ambivalence of border life is the defining feature of border societies; border people may demonstrate ambiguous loyalties because economic, cultural and linguistic factors pull them into two directions. The concept of borders as 'places of passage' calls for an analysis of the practices and experiences of borderland residents and organizations. As Walker (1999: 16) observes, 'relations between the state and borderlanders are portrayed in oppositional terms: penetration, incorporation and homogenisation *versus* resistance, rebellion and difference'. The practices of borderlanders reaching across the border may unleash centrifugal forces that may threaten the centripetal efforts of the state. While state regulations undoubtedly create constraints in borderlands, they also create opportunities, which often support social and cultural exchange across the border. The issue is what happens if different management styles meet in trans-border organizational cooperation. As Flecker and Simsa (2001) have shown, cultural differences can complicate processes of transnational coordination, harmonization, and negotiation. Among these differences range: diverse communicative strategies and styles, differences in local perspectives on the significance of an issue, and different institutional and political environments. These differences may generate conflict in inter-organizational contacts and obstruct cooperative ventures. However, cooperation and

trust based on affinity with a local culture in borderlands may provide a more stable foundation for successful common ventures than do regulations enacted by state authorities. In contrast to Hofstede's focus on national differences within organizations, this article raises the question of whether cultural similarities in borderlands constitute a vehicle for cooperation between organizations. One may theorize that borderlands – in particular those of nation states that may be regarded as close cultural neighbours – foster hybrid cultures that facilitate cooperation between local organizations. In other words, borderland culture acts as a cohesive force that integrates organizations in defiance of national regulations. European integration, which downplays national in favour of regional interests, may support organizational cooperation in borderlands (cf. Bellier and Wilson, 2000).

Thus far, the organizational debate has insufficiently responded to these theoretical and empirical challenges (Martin, 2002: 249–50). Hence the focus in this article on boundaries as symbolic constructs to overcome structural impediments to cooperation in a borderland constituted by two nation states – Germany and the Netherlands – that from a global perspective may be regarded as close cultural neighbours. However, there are large overt and hidden differences between European countries, as Harzing and Sorge (2003: 207) argue. How European integrative forces, national bureaucracies and local cultural similarities and differences affect organizational cooperation in the Dutch-German borderland will be described and analysed below.

The article is structured in the following way. The next section starts with a description of the local geographic setting and the structure of the two different fire brigades and continues with a sketch of the cooperative practices and major similarities and differences in the cultures of both organizations.¹ The third section analyses the political context – at national and (supra-)regional levels – within which both fire brigades operate. In the fourth section, the challenges of cross-border cooperation are related to the partly conflicting interests and demands at subsequently the local, national and European level. The conclusions offer a reflection on both the cohesive and disruptive force of culture in cross-border cooperation efforts in borderlands.

TWO FIRE BRIGADES IN THE DUTCH–GERMAN BORDERLAND

The cooperation between the fire brigades of Millingen aan de Rijn (The Netherlands) and Rindern (Germany) arose on account of an incident on 9 March 1972. Late that evening there was a fire in a farm just across the border in Germany. The fire brigade of Millingen aan de Rijn was alarmed and turned out. By putting the hose under the border barrier, the fire brigade was able to get the fire under control. Shortly after, the fire brigade of Rindern arrived and further settled the call. After the incident, the German chief fire officer contacted his Dutch colleague (Megens, 2001: 31). This has been the starting point of the cooperation. Initially, the cooperation between the two fire brigades was obstructed by the fact that the Dutch hoses could not be attached to the German ones. To solve this problem a coupling was welded with, on one side, an end that fitted the Dutch hoses and, on the other, an end that fitted the German ones. With this coupling both fire brigades were able to hold

¹This article is based on four months of anthropological fieldwork in both fire brigades by the second author. The research strategy applied methodological triangulation, combining participant observation, structured interviews and analysis of secondary data. The researcher conducted 20 interviews with fire officers and firefighters of both brigades and other brigades in the borderland. She attended joint exercises and social events and participated in daily routines of a fire station. Additionally, she analysed written sources about rules and regulations and policy measures pertaining to the task and position of the fire brigades under two different nation states and European institutions.

joint exercises. In order to understand the role and significance of these joint activities of the two fire brigades, a description of both organizations and their geographic setting is required.

The village Millingen aan de Rijn is situated in a remote part of the Netherlands and is bounded by the Rhine river in the north and by Germany in the east. The village takes up an area of 1,033 hectare and has almost 6,000 inhabitants (*Gemeente Millingen aan de Rijn*, 2003). The fire brigade of Millingen aan de Rijn consists of 19 people: 18 men and one woman. Of them, only the chief fire officer is a professional firefighter with a full-time salaried commission. The others are volunteers. Voluntary firemen and firewomen are in the service of the municipality as civil servants, but have salaried jobs elsewhere. Almost all the firefighters live and work in Millingen aan de Rijn. This is a prerequisite, because they have to be able to be present at the fire station as quickly as possible every moment of the day. In order to comply with government regulations, fire brigades have to practice 50 times a year. Almost every Tuesday the firefighters of Millingen aan de Rijn come together to practice. In addition, most of them follow a fire-fighting course on Wednesdays. On Monday evenings some firefighters go to the gym to stay fit. All in all, the volunteers of Dutch fire brigades spend a lot of evenings on 'duty-related' activities. As they regard the fire service as their hobby, they do not mind spending a great deal of their leisure time on it.

Eight kilometres away from Millingen aan de Rijn lies the German village of Rindern. Rindern takes up an area of 673 hectare and has about 3,000 inhabitants (*Freiwillige Feuerwehr*, 2003). Although Rindern is also a border village, it is less isolated than Millingen aan de Rijn. Since the municipal repartition of 1969, the village of Rindern is part of the city of Kleve. As a consequence, the fire brigade of Rindern is integrated with the fire brigade of the city of Kleve as one of its 12 stations. The Rindern fire brigade has 25 firefighters, all male. They fulfil their duty voluntarily and without payment – *ehrenamtlich* [honorary] – and do not receive any compensation for the hours they put in. It is a duty for the community (*Laufbahn in der Freiwilligen Feuerwehr*: paragraph 1.4). In contrast to his Dutch counterpart, the chief fire officer is also a volunteer. He receives only minimal compensation for the hours he spends working for the fire brigade. The firefighters of Rindern also see their duty as a hobby. They practice 25 to 30 times a year. They spend less time on practising than their Dutch colleagues, but as the brigade is part of the fire brigade of the city of Kleve, they have more calls. In summary, the two fire brigades differ in size, gender composition, intensity of practice, degree of professionalization and of integration in encompassing structures. However, both share a strong commitment and feeling of pride at being firefighters.

THE CURRENT COOPERATION

The two fire brigades practice together twice a year. These joint practices have a number of purposes. First, they aim at familiarizing the firefighters with the equipment and the working procedures of the fire brigade from the neighbouring country. Second, they seek to identify situations that require finding solutions for (technical) problems with which the fire brigades have to deal in case of an emergency. For example, the firefighters of Millingen aan de Rijn and Rindern do not have direct communication through radio. Both brigades operate on two different national radio systems that do not interlink. In order to facilitate cross-border communication in cases where both brigades have to work together, one firefighter waits for the fire brigade at the border and hands over one or more radios, so both brigades have access to each other's system. During most exercises, they split the operation scene in two. There is

one Dutch and one German scene of operation. Thereby, both brigades are able to work according to their own methods. The tuning of the two systems takes place mostly at the level of the fire officers. At the level of the firefighters and exercise of tasks, the two fire brigades remain separate organizations.

The cooperation is considered important on both sides of the border, because it offers advantages to both fire brigades. In Millingen aan de Rijn respondents mostly point out that the fire brigade of Rindern can be on the spot quickly. 'It is a reassuring thought that when something is going on, something big that we can't handle alone, we do not only get help from Ubbergen (another Dutch village in the borderland) but also from Germany'. Assistance from Rindern is needed mostly when there is a big fire in Millingen aan de Rijn, because the distance between Millingen aan de Rijn and the Dutch municipalities who are supposed to send assistance in the first place is much larger than the distance between Millingen aan de Rijn and Rindern. Vice versa, the Rindern fire brigade calls in the assistance of their Dutch colleagues, as the Millingen aan de Rijn fire brigade owns advanced equipment in which the German fire brigade is deficient.

Not only instrumental – shorter distances and more advanced equipment – but also affective arguments – personal relations – are given when the importance of the cooperation is discussed with the firefighters. The need to maintain contact at a personal level and the friendly relationships between both fire brigades are important reasons for both brigades to meet outside the exercises a couple of times a year. For example, they compete against each other in sports and visit each other's festivities. The firefighters also cross the border in their free time. When the firefighters of Millingen aan de Rijn and Rindern meet each other, language differences do not play a big role. 'It works well one to one in the direct communication with each other. You can explain things, when you notice that somebody doesn't understand something. Then you try to say it with different words'. People in the Dutch-German borderland speak the regional dialect. The German dialect is almost the same as the Dutch one, so everybody can make him or herself understood. Most of the Dutch firefighters speak (a little) German. Almost none of the German firefighters speak Dutch, but they do understand what is said. In face-to-face contacts the firefighters speak the local dialect, which makes communication easy. During the practices, communication is more difficult if the firefighters speak through the radio and there is no face-to-face contact. At such moments the sender does not always know whether the receiver correctly understands the message.

Another problem is that, when communicating through the radio, the men use technical terms, which may differ in the professional jargon on both sides of the border. 'A *B-Rohr* or a *C-Rohr* – we didn't know them at all. We didn't understand', says a Dutch firefighter about the German terminology for different couplings on hoses. Because of the common practices, most fire officers and firefighters have become familiar with the technical terms used by their neighbours. One way to bridge the language divide is to use a firefighter as a translator. An agreement has been made that a Dutch firefighter accompanies the fire officer of Rindern and a German firefighter accompanies the fire officer of Millingen aan de Rijn. These translators talk to their own fire officer through the radio and translate the message face-to-face for the other fire officer.

Cross-border cooperation between fire brigades is perceived in terms of '*burenhulp*' (neighbourly assistance). This term is defined in a formal sense. It means: cooperation between adjacent municipalities that provide assistance in terms of manpower and equipment (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 1988, article 12). But the term 'neighbourly assistance' also has a second meaning. It is often linked with the essence of the fire brigade: providing assistance to the inhabitants of their municipality. The term is used in Dutch and German texts and slogans about the fire brigade. It refers to the aspects of 'helping out' and of doing well for the community.

THE ISSUE OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

The tasks of the Dutch and German fire brigades are very similar. Since 1985, the Dutch fire brigade has played a central role in disaster management. The task of the fire brigade is formally defined by the law. It says that the fire brigade should prevent, restrict and fight fires, prevent and fight disasters and dangers other than fires (*Brandweerwet*, 1985: section 1). The German fire brigade has three legal tasks. First, the prevention of fires and the danger of fires. Second, the extinction of fires and the protection of human life. Third, the provision of assistance in case of emergency and accident (*Gesetz über den Feuerschutz und die Hilfeleistung*: section 1).

The Dutch and the German fire brigades differ according to the scope of their tasks. In Germany, disaster management is not a task of the municipal fire service but that of the *Kreise* and the cities. Another difference is that the Dutch fire brigade is fully responsible for providing assistance. In Germany, the fire brigade is assisted by a national organization that is specialized in technical assistance in the case of large accidents. Therefore, German voluntary fire brigades own less heavy equipment and are trained less intensively in technical assistance than Dutch ones.

The extension of the task of the Dutch fire brigades in the 1980s marked the onset of a process of professionalization. Recently, the Netherlands has witnessed a number of large disasters, which have led to a more stringent policy concerning the fire service and disaster management. 'Because of the events that have accumulated in the country, the guidelines have become stricter. We now carry out what we have learned from those events; in extreme form for the voluntary fire brigades'. Things have changed for the voluntary firefighters. They practice more, training courses have been enhanced, there are more rules to follow and more firefighters of the voluntary fire brigades become professionals. For the Dutch firefighters in our sample, professionalization is the most important development in the fire service. The idea behind the professionalization of the Dutch fire brigades is that every citizen has the right to receive quick and adequate assistance. It should not make a difference in quality and adequacy whether this assistance is provided by a volunteer or a professional. Therefore, the requirements for education and training of voluntary and professional firefighters are the same. The quality of the service has become more important than its quantity: smaller numbers of fire brigades, firefighters and equipment have to deliver better services.

Judging by the size of the two villages, one would expect the fire brigade of Millingen aan de Rijn to be twice as large as the one from Rindern. The opposite is true. The fire brigade of Rindern has more firefighters. In German voluntary fire brigades, the emphasis is still on quantity. They are used to every village having its own fire station(s). German policymakers have not been confronted with an urgent need to accelerate the pace of professionalization as their Dutch counterparts have been. Practices and courses have been improved in Germany as well, but not as fast and far-reaching as in the Netherlands. In Germany there are still different requirements for voluntary firefighters on the one hand and professional firefighters on the other. The required level of education and the amount of practice are lower for volunteers.

The differences in levels of professionalization affect the way in which the firefighters describe themselves and the colleagues across the border. Dutch volunteers see themselves as near-professionals because they spend a lot of time in the fire brigade to meet the requirements. 'We are in origin volunteers that function as professionals. [...] If I could give us ten credits – to put it very disrespectfully – then I would give Germany seven. They are always at least a step behind'. German volunteers, on the other hand, when asked for a description of their organization, emphasize the aim of the fire service and the voluntary character of the fire brigade. They are positive about the Dutch fire service. Good aspects are the compensation for volunteers, the chief fire officers being professionals instead of volunteers, the level

of education and the special equipment that fire brigades have for technical assistance. One disadvantage of the Dutch fire service that most of the German respondents mention, is that they have to take care of a much larger territory.

ASPECTS OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF THE FIRE BRIGADE

The fire brigade is a hierarchical organization. There are many ranks between the firefighters and the chief fire officer. The chief fire officer is in charge at a call and during practices. 'The fire brigade is a command unit. When a call comes in, I can't say: "And what would you like to do today? Do you want to drive the car or carry the hose?" That of course is not possible'. In case of a call the brigade turns out as quickly as possible. The tasks are divided in a few seconds. All firefighters have a rank. This is generally visible through functional symbols on someone's uniform or by means of stripes on someone's helmet. Wearing clothes that show someone's rank is a clear marker of someone's position and task within the fire brigade and facilitates the allocation of particular tasks during a call. Recently, hierarchical differences have decreased in both brigades as teamwork has come to be more valued. Operating as a team is a matter of safety. While on duty the firefighters have to trust and rely on each other. Safety rules stipulate that firefighters always work in pairs to be able to look after each other. The responsibility for each other's safety and security generates team spirit and a sense of commitment among the members of the brigade.

At a discursive level, companionship is highly valued among firefighters and can be regarded as a special feature of the culture of the fire brigades. Companionship implies working hand in hand for a particular goal. Achieving this goal together brings about shared feelings of friendship and trust. Within the team, openness is encouraged, honesty is highly valued, and problems are discussed. This is necessary because every firefighter should be able to rely on his/her partner in case of a call. In the German discourse, the theme of companionship is particularly prominent. In the Netherlands the concept is less often referred to. Fulfilling a duty in a fire brigade is interpreted as a bonding mechanism between firefighters. In this respect it does not matter whether someone is a professional or a volunteer, a German or a Dutchman. One respondent puts it as follows: 'Firefighters are firefighters. The fire is put out when we take off'. The duty in a fire brigade makes similarities of character and shared interests surface between people. When somebody joins the fire brigade it affects his or her life. The beeper can go off any time, and firefighters say they are never off duty. Wherever they go, they check out emergency exits and fire alarms. Another shared characteristic of firefighters is their fascination with fire. In the words of one of the respondents: 'We all have some sort of passion. As I told you before, as a firefighter you're a little pyromaniac and you're looking for some adventure, I think. That's a characteristic any firefighter should have and most of them have it'. On both sides of the border the firefighters enjoy being called to put out a fire every now and then. This pre-occupation with fire is matched in the inauguration rituals that new firefighters have to go through both in Millingen aan de Rijn and in Rindern. New firefighters are totally soaked once or twice.

The fire brigades on both sides of the border share a common mission: both brigades warrant the physical safety in their territory by fighting fires and providing (technical) assistance. It all comes down to the same: saving and fighting fire. On both sides of the border it is known that the fire brigades pursue the same goal. This mission is one of the most important ones for their cooperation. 'To help: obviously to help and it doesn't matter if there's a border which can't even be called a border nowadays. If I go to Kleve and help there, or if I go to Holland and help, the people are just the same over there as they are here'. To fulfil their mission the firefighters abide to procedures and regulations, another characteristic of the

organizational culture that both fire brigades have in common. These regulations specify how an action should be performed and almost all actions are laid down in procedures to enhance safety. There are procedures for rescuing people from car wrecks and for entering burning houses, but also for turning on oxygen bottles. The procedures that are explained in the fire-fighting courses are observed most of the time, but in case of an emergency exceptions may occur. 'We are allowed by the governance to disregard the procedures in case of an emergency. If a human life is in danger, I don't have to follow the procedures precisely. In that case I can forget about them and save the person'.

However, not only emergency procedures are disregarded at times, also routine command procedures are circumvented. Officially, the main control station in Nijmegen is not supposed to contact the main control station in Kleve directly if in need of assistance. According to the Dutch–German treaties on 'neighbourly assistance' a request for assistance by *Länder* and provinces at the border must be directed at the main control station and from there has to be passed on to the *Commissaris der Koningin* in Arnhem and the *Ländesinnenministerium* Düsseldorf. Approval is reported to the main control station in Kleve (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 1988). This way of requesting and providing assistance is known as the '*koninklijke Weg*' (royal way). In everyday practice, this way of requesting and providing assistance is not the most efficient method. 'By the time they meet up with each other we do not have to go to Holland anymore or they do not have to come to us anymore. The problem will probably be solved already'. The firefighters prefer the '*gefreite Weg*' (free way). This phrase originally stems from the army. *Gefreiter* '... is a rank for soldiers. It's a very low one; the freed one. We always say: "we take the free way". That means, we don't ask the captain if it is allowed. We just do it and hope that nothing goes wrong'.

NATIONAL AND (SUPRA-)REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The cooperation of the two fire brigades in the borderland is embedded in larger institutions that organize and regulate the joint Dutch–German collaboration with regard to fire service and disaster management. In this collaboration, several levels can be distinguished: the local, (supra-)regional and national levels. In the previous section the cooperation at the local level has been described, in this section the (supra-)regional and national levels will be discussed.

In the Netherlands, provinces are a decentralized governmental layer between the national government and the municipalities (Raven and Tromp, 1993: 28). It is difficult to compare the Dutch provinces with the German *Länder*. Besides the difference in size, there are also differences in authority and autonomy. Some tasks that are performed by the provinces in the Netherlands are performed by the *Kreise* in Germany. However, the territory of a *Kreis* corresponds more with the territory of the Dutch region. These organizations have a different formal status. The *Kreis* is an institution that has a constitutionally defined position with its own governing bodies and a representation elected by the citizens. A Dutch region on the other hand is a joint arrangement between a number of villages (Hertoghs and Rambach 1997: 18). Which way these sub-national governments with different sizes, tasks, compositions and diverging levels of centralization cooperate in the domain of the fire service and disaster management is the theme of this section.

In the borderland, the cooperation at the regional level takes place between the regional fire brigade *Nijmegen en Omstreken* and *Kreisverwaltung Kleve*. Three municipalities of the Dutch region border on Germany; respectively, eight German municipalities are located in the border region. The regional fire brigade has the task of coordinating disaster management (Brandweerwet, 1985: section 3). The *Kreisverwaltung* is responsible for disaster management on the German side (*Gesetz über den Feuerschutz und die Hilfeleistung*, 1998:

paragraph 1). The main difference between both organizations is that the *Kreisverwaltung* is responsible for disaster management whereas, in the Netherlands, disaster management is a responsibility of the municipalities. The regional fire brigade and the *Kreisverwaltung* cooperate in disaster management, in particular during incidents with a cross-border character, such as floods caused by the river Rhine, shipping incidents on the river and accidents involving chemical and toxic substances.

The provinces and *Bezirksregierungen* form the political layer above the regional one. The task of the Province of Gelderland is to test municipal disaster plans, to advise mayors in case of calamities in their community and to install a coordination centre in case of a disaster that involves a number of municipalities. The *Bezirksregierung* Düsseldorf is a section of the *Land* North Rhine Westphalia. It supervises and coordinates the local governments. The *Bezirksregierungen* are not decentralized governmental bodies, but de-concentrated services. They have no formal tasks regarding fire service and disaster management. In the past, joint consultations between the Province of Gelderland and the *Bezirksregierung* Düsseldorf have been shelved due to lack of decision-making power of the *Bezirksregierung*.

Above the layer of the provinces and *Bezirksregierungen* is the national layer with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the *Land* North Rhine Westphalia as major political players. The Dutch Ministry of Internal Affairs is responsible for the national policy concerning fire brigades and disaster management. In Germany, it is not the national government but the *Länder* which are responsible for the organization of the fire service and disaster management. The *Land* North Rhine Westphalia, therefore, has its own law for this domain. The Dutch–German collaboration at the national levels revolves around the initiation of research into cross-border cooperation, the setting up of projects that benefit the Dutch–German cooperation and the establishment of treaties that regulate this cooperation. In 1988, an agreement was reached regarding responsibilities, border formalities and costs. Section 12 of this agreement addresses neighbourly assistance and allows border municipalities to draw up a *neighbour treaty* at the local level (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 1988). In 2000, a general statement of the Netherlands and the *Land* North Rhine Westphalia was achieved in order to support and promote the cross-border cooperation between the fire brigades, disaster management and the police (*Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties*, 2000a). Since June 2000, Dutch and German fire engines are authorized to pass through the neighbouring country with sirens and flashing lights on (*Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties*, 2000b). The Dutch government and the government of the *Land* North Rhine Westphalia have made an arrangement that defines different conditions on both sides of the border. German engines can come to the Netherlands unconditionally. However, before Dutch engines are allowed to cross the border with sirens and flashing lights, German authorities have to apply officially for the Dutch to come.

In addition to national institutions, the European Union has a voice in the cross-border cooperation in fire services and disaster management. Millingen aan de Rijn and Rindern are both located in the territory of the EU-region Rijn-Waal. This territory takes up two German *Kreise*, the city of Duisburg, four complete Dutch regions and another three partially. The goal of the EU-region is ‘the stimulation of the social integration in the Dutch–German borderland around the rivers Rhine, Waal and Maas by organizing the cross-border cooperation’ (Euregio Rijn-Waal: n.d.).

The European Action Programme for disaster management was drawn up after the Maastricht Treaty of 1991. The current programme focuses on the improvement of cross-border cooperation by promoting the exchange of knowledge and experience. Since 1991, the European Union has set up INTERREG Programmes, which offer subsidies for projects of at least €50,000 with an explicit cross-border character. After the floods of 1993 and 1995, the regional fire brigade *Nijmegen en Omstreken* and the *Kreisverwaltung* Kleve have received a

subsidy for inundation techniques that can be applied in situations of high water. The EU-region impacts on national arrangements for fire services and disaster management by creating frameworks and schemes that facilitate cooperation.

THE QUEST FOR THE COUPLING

The future of national borders in a globalizing world is the object of scholarly debate, as has been discussed in the introduction. Whereas some scholars expect national borders simply to evaporate, others emphasize their role in the symbolic production of difference, while again others view borders as ‘places of passage’, which question established spheres of dominance and power. In this respect, the cooperation between organizations across national borders may lead either to a fusion of organizational practices and a blurring of organizational boundaries, an increased emphasis on cultural differences between the organizations involved, or to fluctuating and situationally defined forms of collaboration in a context of ambiguous power relations.

What role does the European Union play in this cross-border collaborative effort? The regional policy of the European Union has to be conceived as an instrument ‘to provide cohesion to the EU as much as, if not more so, to its regions’ (Wilson, 2000: 142). At first sight, the European Union – through the EU-region and the related Action Programme and INTERREG – supports and facilitates cross-border initiatives such as the cooperation of the two fire brigades. However, at a local level, there are many inhibitions to benefiting fully from subsidies at the European level. Procedures are complex, involve lots of red tape and exceed the possibilities of small-scale organizations such as the two fire brigades. Compared with the ambitious aims, which the European Union defines for cross-border collaboration, local initiatives are quite modest in scale and scope. Often, a barbecue and a new coupling are sufficient to get an initiative off the ground. This is too small a project to draw up and submit to the bureaucracy of the European Union (cf. also Wilson, 2000).

Larger projects at a European scale (or national and regional levels for that matter) do not appeal to local fire brigades as they fear the effects that obligatory cooperation with fire brigades at a European level may exert on their autonomy and level of professionalization. It may imply that equipment has to be purchased jointly (which impacts on the price, quality and availability of the material) and that training courses and educational programmes for firefighters become standardized at a European average. The advanced fire brigades in North and West Europe are afraid that they will suffer from the much lower level of their counterparts in the South and the East through the rise of costs and the decline of the services. In the Netherlands, the disasters of Enschede in 2000 (an explosion in a firework factory that wiped out a neighbourhood) and Volendam (a fire in a pub that killed and injured dozens of youngsters on New Year’s Day 2001) mobilized citizens and politicians alike and generated investments in the fire prevention and the training, equipment and staffing of the fire brigades in the country. These improvements meet with general support in Dutch society because of the shock effect of the two disasters that kept the whole nation on its toes for months. In neighbouring countries, these tragedies had no effect whatsoever on the organization of their fire brigades. Obviously, disasters that remain confined within the borders are regarded as of purely national significance. Collaboration at a European level would weaken control on local affairs and enforce participation in incidents at remote locations, which do not mobilize local or national feelings of solidarity.

At community level, the very fact that Millingen aan de Rijn and Rindern are under the sovereignty of two autonomous nation states imposes a number of restrictions on the cooperation. These nation states provide compelling institutional and legal frameworks that define

the tasks, the action radius, the competencies and structures of control. As our case study convincingly shows, the power of the nation state – which in the federal structure of Germany is delegated to the level of the *Bundesland* when it comes to fire services and disaster management – is uncontested and the unequal power relations between the Netherlands and its big neighbour Germany are reflected in the asymmetrical competencies of the two fire brigades even at the level of collaboration. In terms of authority, the Netherlands has to answer to a German *Bundesland*; The Hague – location of the Dutch national administration – shares competencies not with Berlin but with Düsseldorf, a ‘provincial’ capital. While the German fire brigade is allowed to enter Dutch territory with few restrictions, the Dutch counterpart has to resign itself to bureaucratic red tape when returning the call.

National and European incentives, then, play only a marginal role in this decision as our case study shows. Millingen aan de Rijn chooses to collaborate with Rindern because there are a few factors that bind the two villages and their fire brigades together. At the community level there is a shared borderland culture, which is characterized by multiple exchanges, traditions of neighbourly assistance and a common dialect that facilitates communication among the borderlanders. It is questionable, however, whether the borderland is characterized by a hybrid culture that represents a mix of Dutch and German elements. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss issues of national identities. Suffice it to say that borderlanders exhibit a greater familiarity with each other’s culture than do the members of the two adjacent nation states at large. The threshold to cross the border for mutual benefit is relatively low and a shared local dialect spoken or at least understood on both sides of the border facilitates cross-border communication. In this respect this borderland is a ‘place of passage’ indeed.

Turning to the two fire brigades on both sides of the Dutch–German border we find that, much in line with Walker’s (1999) description of the borderland condition, the relationship between both organizations is characterized by conflicting forces that emphasize integration and interdependencies on the one hand and towards autonomy and independence on the other. Basically, the fire brigades are autonomous (under municipal responsibility). Cooperative efforts between the fire brigades across the border are a matter of individual preference. The chief fire officers can make the decision to start cross-border cooperation independently of wider institutional frameworks. National institutions such as ministries, and supra-national bodies such as the European Union may offer incentives to promote cross-border cooperation, but they cannot force local firefighters to work together. The motivation among firefighters to do so may be instrumental, based on the experience that their own brigade cannot handle larger incidents on their own, or affective, as the fire brigades are part and parcel of larger social and cultural exchanges in the borderland – or a mixture of both.

At the level of the fire brigades, commonalities are created and maintained by a shared historical event which started the cooperation over thirty years ago, the mission of helping people, the subscription to the principle of neighbourly assistance, and an organizational culture characterized by hierarchy, a common body of knowledge, joint practices and a shared mission. The cooperation is maintained because the members of the two brigades fancy the sociability that goes with the exercises, which illustrates that both instrumental and affective motives support this initiative. However, collaboration of fire brigades is not a phenomenon that characterizes the Dutch–German borderland at large, as may be illustrated by the absence of joint activities in the neighbouring cross-border villages of Groesbeek (the Netherlands) and Kranenburg (Germany). Cross-border cooperation is based on individual initiatives and personal preferences, and as such it is vulnerable and threatened by fragmentation. The joint exercises, the ingenious solution to the technical problem of linking the hoses and the smooth social exchanges cannot hide the fact that both fire brigades work according to their own system – even during the joint exercises – because these systems are too

divergent to be joined together. After all, the two brigades keep speaking their own national languages and professional jargons when on duty. In contrast to everyday life, where local dialect bridges cultural gaps, the world of the fire brigades requires to a return to national cadres, including language, when on duty.

More importantly, both brigades differ in their level of professionalization. The divisive element is the organizational culture, which in the case of the Dutch fire brigade is tuned to the concept of professionalism, whereas the German counterpart remains an organization of volunteers. The German fire brigade exhibits a value system that is characteristic of public service organizations, fostering comradeship and friendship. This is largely shared by their Dutch counterpart. However, slowly but surely, the Dutch fire brigade exhibits features of a professional organization which emphasizes trained skills and competencies *besides* sociability. As a consequence, one may expect cohesion within the brigade to be a more fundamental value among German firefighters, while their Dutch counterparts may become more concerned with professional standards. This gap that is eventually opening up between the two organizational cultures is related to the embedding of the fire brigades in two sovereign national states.

The cooperation between the two fire brigades is strong at the discursive level. It adds to the overall feeling of security and to the social life of the borderlanders, it operationalizes the notion of neighbourly assistance and the mission of the fire brigade. However, in the case of a disaster, the fragmentation that cuts through both systems would resurface immediately. As both brigades are aware of this fragmentation, they organize the joint practices in order to find technical solutions for the problems that are due to emerge because of the obvious differences between the two systems – a new coupling to connect hoses or a communication system to bridge the language divide. The quest for autonomy, which is supported by the national institutional frameworks that constitute both fire brigades, does not facilitate any integration, only a limited number of adjustments.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the question of how processes of transnationalization affect inter-organizational cooperation across borders, the case study of two fire brigades in the Dutch–German borderland convincingly shows that nationally defined boundaries do not just evaporate as a consequence of this cooperation. The compelling frameworks of national institutions, policies, laws and regulations have a strong impact on the organizations within the state boundaries, embedded in and enforced by a common history, shared traditions and culture. The red and white bars marking the national border may have disappeared; borderlanders still speak of ‘*rüber gehen*’ (walking across) when calling on their national neighbours. The people of Rindern do not visit Millingen, they go to *Holland*; things are different *here* from over *there*, and if the national soccer teams play a competition Rindern is ‘a bridge too far’ for many a Millinger soccer fan. In many respects, the borderland is a space for the symbolic production of cultural differences.

Boundary maintenance also happens at the organizational level – although discourses of cooperation may emphasize commonalities. Organizational boundaries may be allowed to become more permeable and invite collaboration, as long as this does not erode the core of the organization. Border crossings are accepted, even encouraged, as long as they are for fun, sociability, a joint barbecue, a shared mission, neighbourly assistance and mutual interest. These border crossings are innocent, politically correct, ethically responsible – and sometimes even useful. Sometimes these crossings may require the ‘*gefreite Weg*’ instead of the bureaucratically required ‘*königliche Weg*’. Whoever reads a strategy of resistance and

rebellion in these small violations of the cross-border treaties and national laws, misinterprets the playful character of the situation. The core of both organizations, however, is autonomy and independence. This organizational core is supported by two increasingly divergent organizational cultures, one oriented towards a public service ethos and another oriented towards professionalism.

In the final analysis, cultural similarities in borderlands may bring together people and, as a consequence, may constitute a vehicle for cooperation between organizations. But this borderland culture as such does not facilitate cooperation, far less acts as a cohesive force that integrates organizations across the border. An important factor in either smoothing or hampering the progress of cross-border cooperation is organizational culture. Efforts to manage organizational cohesion may resort to discursive strategies of emphasizing commonalities in cooperative ventures; diverging organizational cores will easily overrule these efforts and prompt fragmentation.

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