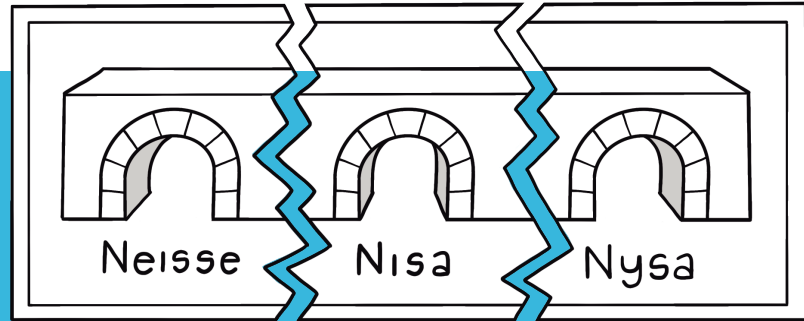


The impossible dream of a trilateral bridge



For many years, living in the tri-border area between Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland meant being located far away from any urban centre, and with hard borders in place. Since 1989, when the Wall came down, many cross-border projects therefore focused on people-to-people contacts, getting to know each other and building trust. The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 gave an additional push to these efforts, which also marked the time when the citizens of the region developed their joint dream project through a bottom-up initiative: the construction of a pedestrian/bicycle bridge across the river Neisse – Nisa – Nysa, which for so many years had marked the end of their territory.

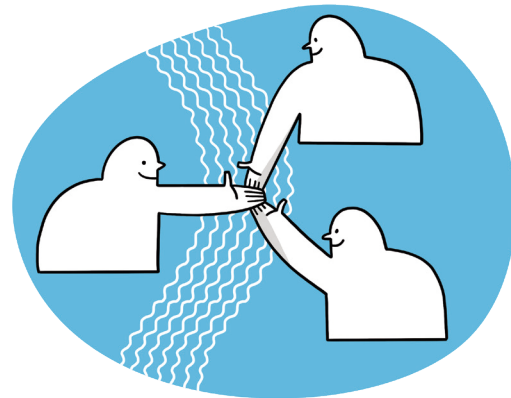
The idea was to build a bridge of symbolic rather than functional value, which would explicitly show that these territories were reunited and could also increase tourism. Ever since, the area around the bridge has been used for shared cultural and sports activities. Representatives from the three border municipalities concerned – Zittau in Germany, Bogatynia in Poland and Hrádez nad Nisou in the Czech Republic – also met to set the project

in motion. Initially, there was an improved wooden bridge, which connected the Czech and Polish sides, and it was planned to be replaced within two years with a new trilateral bridge that would connect all three countries.

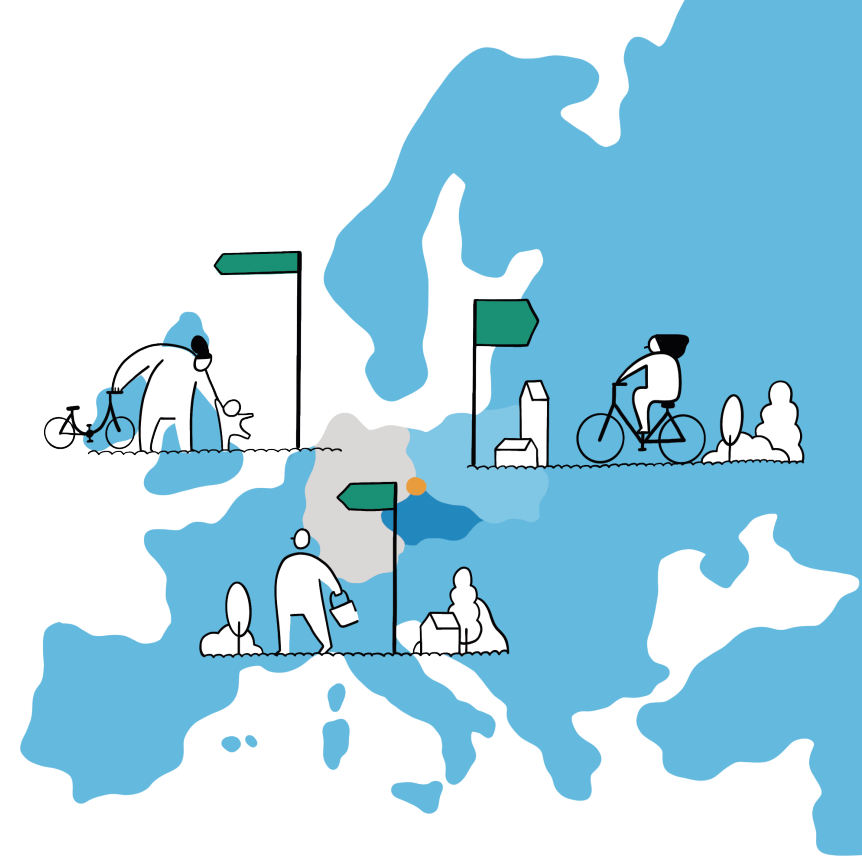
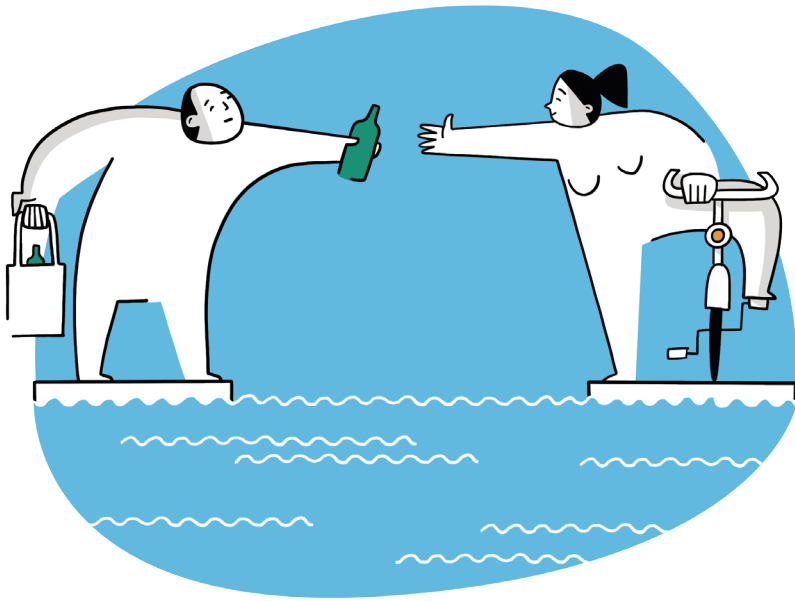
Due to the high costs, the Polish side delegated the project to the regional government of the Lower Silesian Voivodship and its Railway and Road Authority. On this basis, the initial project was developed in 2015. However, this created a sort of imbalance between the partners (two local authorities and one regional authority). In addition, the project encountered several administrative and financial obstacles.

Furthermore, obtaining a construction permit for the three countries proved to be an impossible mission, since three individual national construction permits for one piece of trilateral cross-border infrastructure was required. **Hynek Böhm**, *b-solutions* expert of the **University of Liberec**, explains that

“ whereas there is a habit to have bilateral agreements on the elements of cross-border infrastructure, this is not the case for trilateral ones.” And unfortunately, “politicians and policy-makers are not used to the fact that cross-border cooperation issues take time.”



Both the procedures and the recognition of professional qualifications of civic engineers for such permits differ considerably in the three countries. For example, the Czech chamber refused to authorise the Polish colleagues and asked them to undergo additional administrative procedures, such as the registration at the Czech Chamber of Chartered Engineers and taking a language test, which was not feasible.



What are the possible solutions?

- The fastest way would be to hire a **trinational team** of engineers, who would then apply for the authorisations in their respective countries, although tripling the team also seems somehow out of proportion for this type of project.
- A **trilateral intergovernmental agreement** could speed up the entire project.
- Allowing the team of engineers to obtain permissions from the other countries to build a piece of infrastructure, regardless of the country that issued their diplomas. **Applying the legislation of the territory of the neighbouring countries** could also substantially ease the pre-construction works.

Unfortunately, relationships between the authorities have deteriorated in recent months, due to problems around a nearby coal mine on the Polish side. The Polish government has plans to extend its exploitation until 2036, which could have an impact on drinking water and the environment in the neighbouring countries. This has affected the level of trust and willingness to collaborate with each other, and the German and Czech authorities have decided to go ahead by building a more functional and cost-efficient bilateral bridge instead.

After more than 15 years of efforts, this is obviously a huge disappointment for the citizens in the region. Luckily, the Polish will still be just a few steps away from their Czech neighbours and can use the bridge to Germany all the same. In the end, it all depends on the will of people to get connected, no matter what the politicians decide. The COVID-19 pandemic has already allowed people to get very creative, such as holding beer exchanges across the river when the borders were closed!