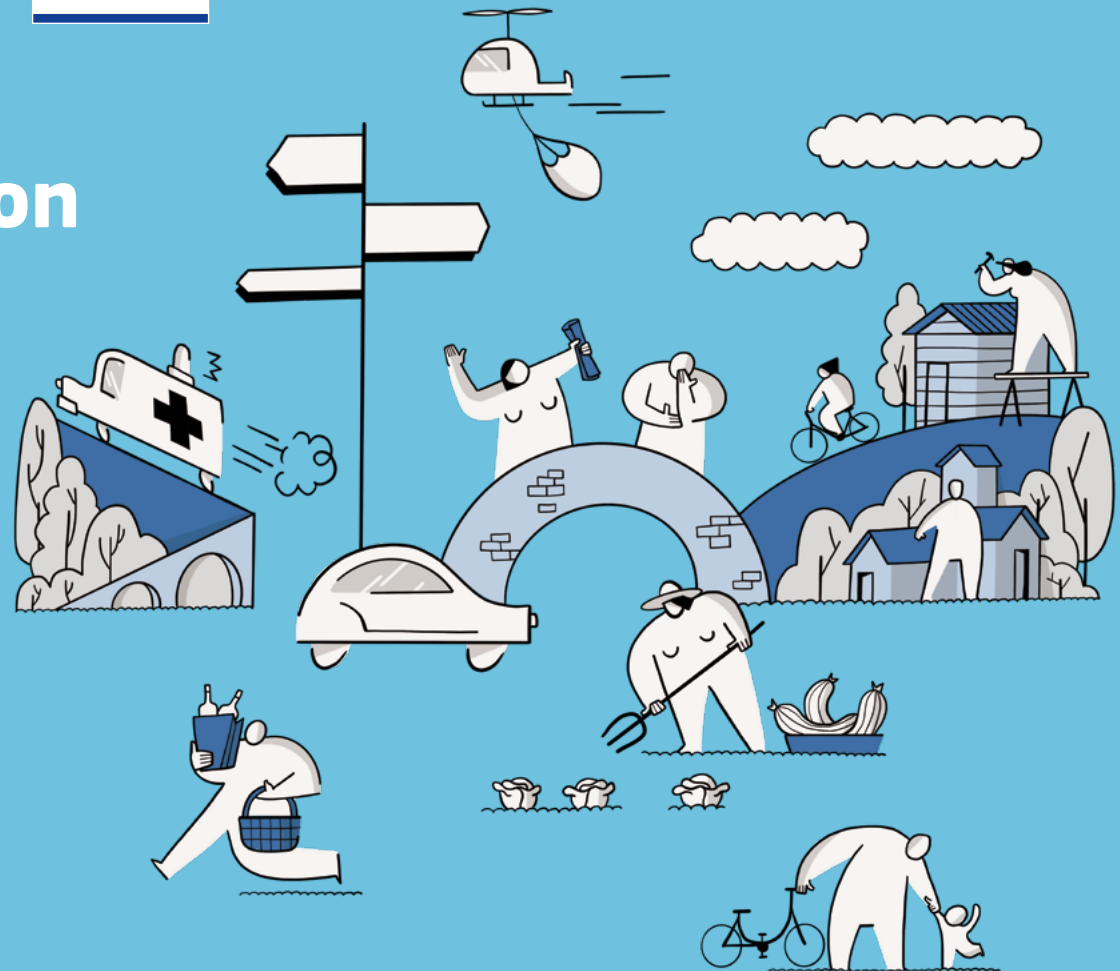




Living in a Cross-border Region

Seven stories of obstacles to a more integrated Europe



IMPRINT

Printed by Gutenberg Beuys Feindruckerei GmbH in Germany
Graphic Design: Anna Landskron, www.surfacegrafik.de
Illustrations: Isabel de Olano, <https://www.isabeldeolano.com/>

Manuscript completed in November, 2021

© *Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) and European Union, 2021*

Reuse is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

Distorting the original meaning or message of this document is not allowed.
The European Commission is not liable for any consequence stemming from the reuse of this publication.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors only and should not be considered as representative of the European Commission's official position.

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the copyright of the European Union, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021

Print ISBN 978-92-76-43964-6 DOI 10.2776/420556 KN-09-21-511-EN-C
PDF ISBN 978-92-76-43965-3 DOI 10.2776/825972 KN-09-21-511-EN-N

This publication was written by Dorothee Fischer, Carlos Buhigas Schubert, Caitlin Boucher (Legado Sharpe&Fischer, <https://dorotheefischer.com>), Giulia Brustia, Cathrin Cordes, Anna Cinzia Dellagiocoma, Martin Guillermo-Ramírez (AEBR) in collaboration with Ricardo Ferreira (European Commission).

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH THE EU

In person

All over the European Union there are hundreds of Europe Direct information centres.
You can find the address of the centre nearest you at: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en

On the phone or by email

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union.

You can contact this service:

- by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls),
- at the following standard number: +32 22999696 or
- by email via: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en

FINDING INFORMATION ABOUT THE EU

Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website at: https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en

EU publications

You can download or order free and priced EU publications at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publications>.

Multiple copies of free publications may be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local information centre (see https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en).

EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1952 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

Open data from the EU

The EU Open Data Portal (<http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en>) provides access to datasets from the EU.
Data can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes.

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH AEBR

The Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)

Administration:

Enscheder Straße 362
D-48599 Gronau (Germany)
Tel.: +49 2562 70219
Fax: +49 2562 70259
info@aebr.eu

Project Office:

AEBR c/o WeWork
Neue Schönhauserstraße 3-5
10178 Berlin (Germany)
Tel.: +49 17642090666
b-solutions@aebr.eu

AEBR Antenna in Brussels:

Office of Extremadura
Tel: +32 (0)2 736 59 50
Av. de Cortenbergh 89, 2°
Fax: +32 (0) 2 736 60 10
B-1000 Brussels (Belgium)
extremadura.brussels@gobex.es

Index

Preface by the European Commission	4
Preface by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)	5
Introduction	6
Working better together to improve fire control	8
A summer of love, or how to support young graduates from Spain and France in their cross-border careers	10
A “free ride” for drivers between Germany and France	12
Ambulances without borders for better emergency services	14
Norwegian wood, or how to boost business across borders in Scandinavia	16
The impossible dream of a trilateral bridge	18
Less obstacles to cross-border food markets for happier local farmers	20
References	22

Preface by the European Commission

People living in border regions experience daily the benefits of European integration. The right to live, study, work, across borders shows in practice one of the great added values of the European Union: internal borderlessness.

Border regions are, therefore, the best tangible expression of what being European means. For this reason, the European Commission has adopted a report this year showcasing EU border regions “as living labs of European integration”.

Breaking down barriers amongst places is mostly about improving people’s lives. However, tapping the full potential of border regions does not come without challenges. Too frequently, EU internal borders still represent hurdles to individuals, companies, or civil society, due to incompatible legal frameworks or administrative procedures that do not fully consider the territory beyond the border.

It is our duty and responsibility to overcome these constraints and ensure that no individual or territory is left behind. With the aim to achieve this vision, the Commission, together with the Association of European Border Regions, has been implementing the *b-solutions* initiative. So far, this initiative has supported 90 case studies from across Europe, identifying factors blocking cross-border cooperation, and finding possible solutions to overcome them. This is highly important work, as the way forward for border regions is also the way forward for Europe.

By telling us the stories of some individuals in different borders in Europe, this publication shows that working to overcome border obstacles has a great power to improve people’s lives and bring the European Union closer to its citizens. That is our commitment. And a lot more can be done if all levels of administration – European, national, regional and local – commit to this goal. Let us step up to the challenge and make our border regions more integrated, more resilient and more prosperous.



Elisa Ferreira

The Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms



Preface by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)

Europe is the continent with the highest density of national borders, and even though one of the objectives of the European Union is to reduce the difficulties these may pose for citizens and their everyday life, they have not disappeared yet. Our Association of European Border Regions has worked for fifty years to make them visible, highlighting the needs and interests of border Europeans, and to promote trans-border cooperation by bringing its added value to the foreground.

This publication illustrates a selection of obstacles that have a direct impact on citizens living in border regions, which should be taken into account by public authorities and policymakers in the European institutions, national parliaments and governments, or at the regional and local level in order to respond appropriately to the citizens' needs, but also to move forward towards "tangible" European integration – whether it is about implementing appropriate and integrated public services that take into account cross-border territoriality, facilitating access to the labour market in regions that are otherwise remote, making it easier to do business, shopping and other activities on the other side of the border. Ultimately, it is about improving quality of life for one third of the European population living in border areas, and making these regions more liveable.

I myself come from a border region and I am well aware of how difficult and complex borders are. But I also know that cross-border cooperation can effectively alleviate these difficulties and substantially improve the life of citizens, making these regions more attractive for those who live there. In a united Europe, cross-border areas should be the territories where integration starts and continues to develop; a small-scale Europe, acting as real laboratories and catalysts of integration to lay the foundation of the European House.

I hope that these stories will help you, the reader, understand the great efforts and creativity that are necessary to overcome the manifold obstacles that still characterise life in border regions.

Happy reading, and see you at the border!



Karl-Heinz Lambertz

President of Parliament of the German-speaking community of Belgium
President of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)



Introduction

There are 40 land borders connecting the Member States of the European Union and three of their partners in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) – Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. In total, 448 different NUTS-3 territories share at least one national boundary. As a result, more than 150 million European citizens – that is, almost one third of the entire EU population – live in a border region today, and their daily life is shaped by this very fact.

To this end, overcoming the obstacles that living in a border region entails is therefore one of the major objectives of the EU's Cohesion Policy.

For this reason, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) launched the *b-solutions* pilot initiative in 2017. The project, which is managed by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), aims to address the legal and administrative obstacles hindering cross-border cooperation along the EU internal land borders. Ultimately, the goal is to find solutions to those obstacles that are preventing citizens and businesses alike in border regions from accessing services such as public transport, recruiting personnel or healthcare.

Between 2018 and 2021, four calls for proposals were launched, through which a total of 90 case studies from across Europe were selected that shed light on the most recurrent cross-border obstacles at present. The case studies dealt with topics such as health, multilingualism, employment, transport, e-Government and institutional cooperation in general. With the help of legal experts, an in-depth analysis of the cases was conducted in order to identify sustainable and replicable solutions.

Even though there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution, since local contexts are different and often involve numerous local and national institutions in different Member States, the project managed to collect good examples for possible solutions that can inspire other regions with similar problems.

The overall analysis of the cases confirms that obstacles emerge in particular due to overcomplicated legal and administrative procedures in border regions, as two sets of regulations converge. At times, the difficulty is caused by a lack of coordination among the stakeholders on the two sides of the national boundaries. Sometimes, laws and administrative procedures do not allow for the necessary exceptions required in a cross-border context, since these regions face particular challenges that call for specific and tailored responses. In most cases, fresh solutions are needed through the introduction of new legislative provisions or the formulation of innovative methodologies and action protocols.

In this regard, among the most common solutions suggested by the *b-solutions* experts are changes in the legal framework and the use of complementary tools, such as funding through Interreg or the set-up of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). The need for innovative methods to support cross-border cooperation and provide tools to local actors to overcome legal and administrative obstacles is also clear and calls for urgent action.

As such, *b-solutions* was part of a set of new and concrete actions to enhance cohesion in cross-border areas, which was included in the Communication *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in European Border Regions* (COM(2017)534)¹ adopted by the European Commission in 2017.

In its 2021 report *EU Border Regions: Living labs of European integration*², the European Commission looked at the cases collected through *b-solutions*, drawing conclusions for the future of cross-border cooperation in the EU, while deciding to further extend this pivotal initiative. The results and knowledge gathered during the project will be widely shared with policymakers across Europe, and they have also been considered in the preparation of the new programming period of the European Union for 2021-2027.

This publication tells the story of how the lives of the people and communities in border regions are still being affected today, and what kind of obstacles they are facing in their everyday professional or private lives.

In a journey from south-west Europe to the eastern part of the European Union, we invite you to read the story of Rosa Maria from Portugal, who has witnessed the growing threat of forest fires at the border with Spain in recent years; of Irati and François, who seemed to have to choose between their relationship and a career; or the Müllers from Germany, who were fined when visiting their French friends. Looking at the North of Europe, we will meet the De Jongs from the Netherlands, who are worried about reaching an emergency room on time, and the Swedish business owner Jonas Hell, who has difficulties hiring workers from Norway. There are also the citizens at the border region between Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic, who have been dreaming of a trilateral pedestrian bridge for almost 20 years. Or read about Stefan and Sofia, two small-scale apple farmers from Romania who are struggling to get by because they cannot sell their produce in neighbouring Hungary.

For more details on each of these obstacles, two compendiums and specific thematic analyses provide precise information and insights on the legal frameworks of these and other (up to 90) cases collected within the *b-solutions* initiative so far. They are publicly accessible on a dedicated website³.

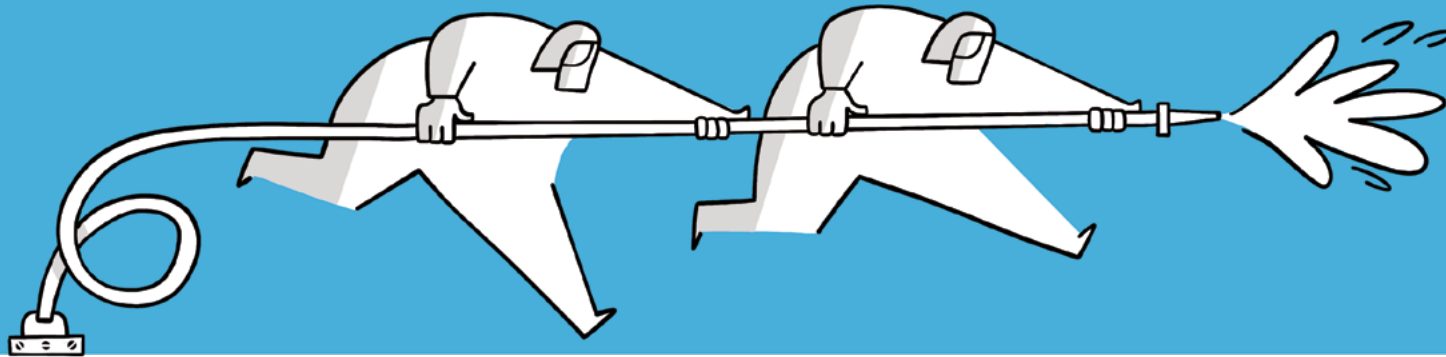
We hope you enjoy reading about them, and we hope that these stories will contribute to reducing those and similar obstacles in the future to make sure that border regions are not left behind in Europe and beyond.

1 Communication from the European Commission to the Council and the European Parliament *Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions*, COM(2017) 534 final of 20 September 2017.

2 Report from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions *EU Border Regions: living labs of European integration*, COM(2021) 393 final of 14 July 2021.

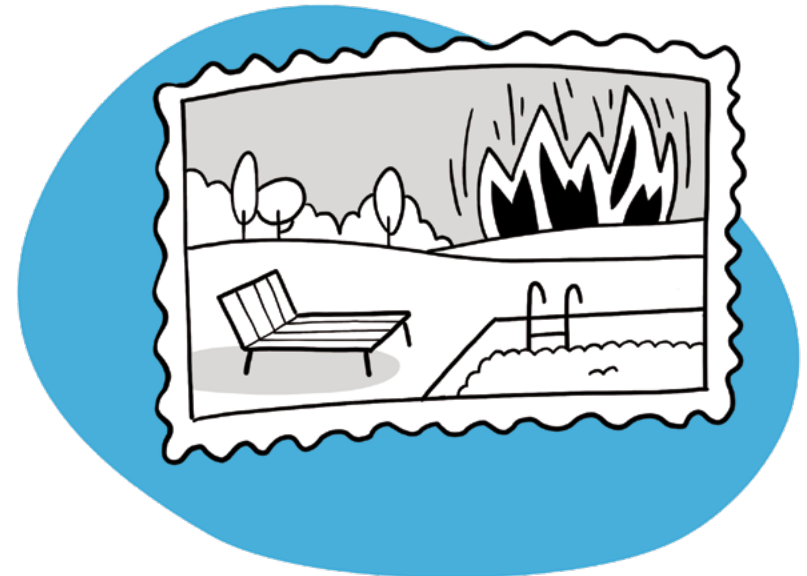
3 Association of European Border Regions, *b-solutions*, <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>.

Working better together to improve fire control



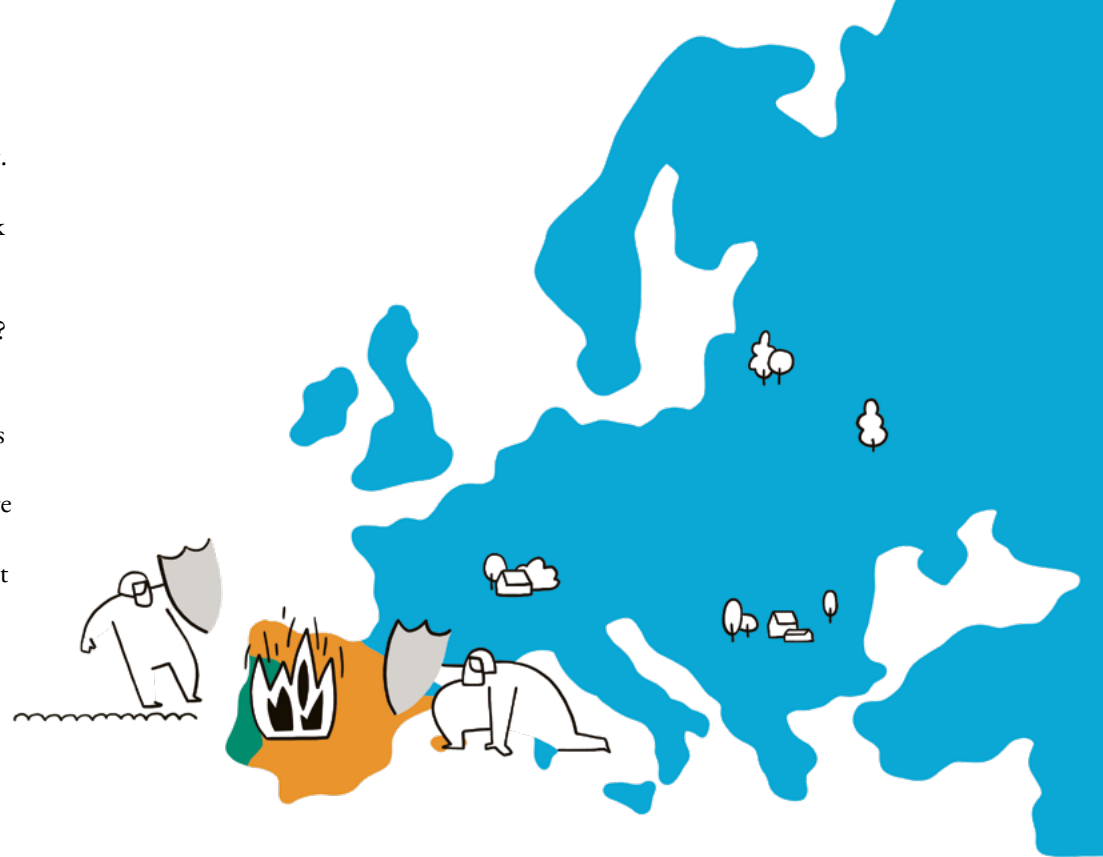
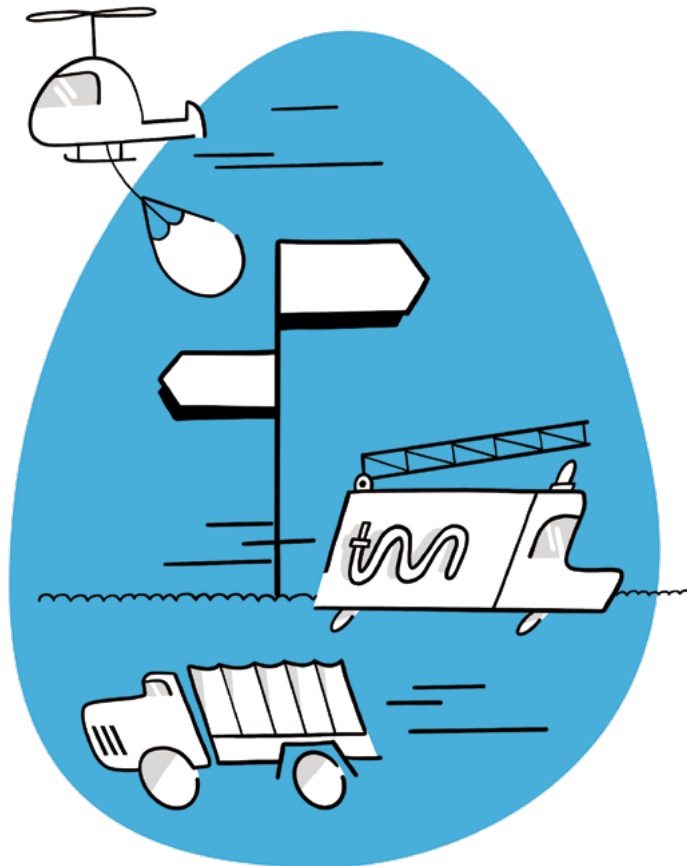
Rosa Maria was born in São Pedro do Rio Seco (Portugal), very close to the border with Spain. Stories of fires, particularly during the summer months, were part of her childhood and always made a strong impression on her. As an adult, she has been studying the evolution of fires. She bitterly remembers the tragedy that occurred in 2017 in Pedrógao Grande (Portugal), when 66 people died, and she refers to the mega-fires that the world has witnessed in recent years, such as those in Australia in 2019 or California and Oregon in 2020, to explain how they are bigger, more unpredictable and much more destructive than just a few decades ago.

Fighting fires is even more difficult when borders are involved. National disasters can easily spread across borders and require well-coordinated efforts. The border between Spain and Portugal exemplifies that challenge well. From the very south to the north of the Peninsula, the border area is highly prone to fires. Fortunately, cooperation to fight fires in Spain and Portugal has shown considerable progress in recent years. For example, firefighters, police and military from both countries are allowed to travel up to 25 kilometers into the territory of the other country to fight the flames in particularly serious situations. However, more is needed.



National strategies to fight natural disasters show remarkable differences across borders. For example, in terms of infrastructure, Spain has more aircraft and heavy machinery, while Portugal has more terrestrial equipment. Those entail different ways of training, establishing protocols, and organising and executing firefighting operations on the ground. Additionally, the lack of a common language, particularly in the coordination of highly risky operations, remains a critical problem. There is a common understanding about the need to work better together, but what does this mean in practice?

Prevention has greatly improved. Measures such as more information and awareness, better preparation of the fields and forests so that the fires are less virulent, ensuring good conditions of both infrastructure and machinery, and better investigation into the causes of fires are all ongoing efforts that are proving successful. However, there are other aspects more specific to the nature of cross-border action that could lead to major improvements to fight fires successfully.

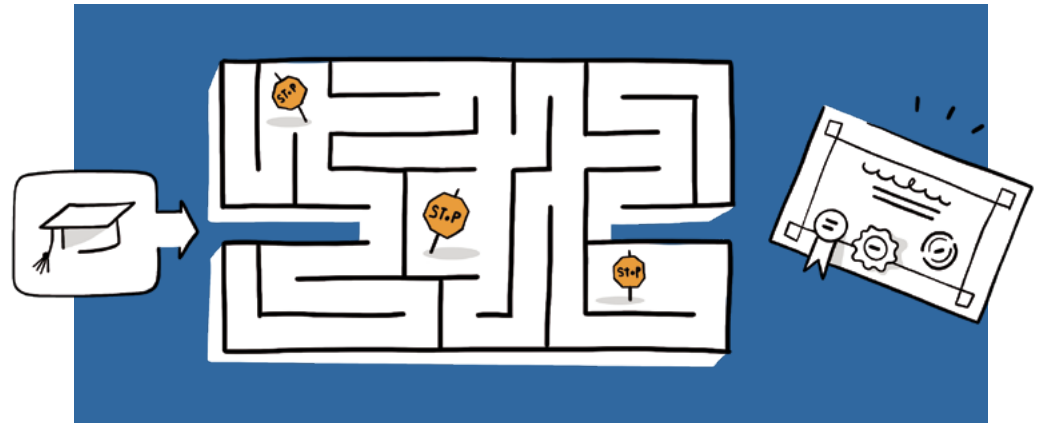


According to **Juan Gómez Roldán**, Head of the Forest Fire Prevention and Extinction Service of the Region of Extremadura,

“ unlike in other areas, better cooperation in this field does not require more financial resources, but rather a combination of steps to consolidate an adequate framework for working better together. ”

In this sense, *b-solutions* has been instrumental in identifying two measures that would considerably improve their capacity to work together efficiently. The first one is to harmonise the certificate to conduct air operations in Spain and Portugal. This would speed up the capacity to respond in order to extinguish a fire. The second is improving the capacity of Spanish and Portuguese firefighters to coordinate operations, and at the same time, overcome the language and communication challenges. The creation of a Single Operational Command would provide an enormous added value, improving the management and coordination of fire control in cross-border regions, as well as gradually agreeing on protocols and methods to combat fire emergencies to protect the environment and save people's lives.

A summer of love, or how to support young graduates from Spain and France in their cross-border careers



Leyre Azcona, Project Manager for employment, education and innovation at the Euroregion Nouvelle-Aquitaine Euskadi Navarre (NAEN), confirms that

“ in the area of vocational training there are many barriers still, since these are regulated professions, and many different regional and state administrations are in charge of recognising the diplomas. Often you end up having to travel to Madrid or Paris to find a solution. ”

It was love at first sight when Irati and François met during their summer holidays in the Pyrenees in 2019. They both knew that it was the start of something serious. And since Irati had just finished her professional training as an early-childhood educator in Pamplona (Spain), she did not have to think twice and decided to move to Pau (France) where François was working in the metal industry. It was no secret that there was a high demand for child educators in France, so she thought she would easily settle into her new home.

But what had started as a perfect love story soon turned out to be a journey into a bureaucratic nightmare. Whereas it is indeed relatively easy nowadays to work in another European country after having obtained a university diploma, the situation is completely different for regulated professions in the social, educational and health sectors which, on the other hand, are extremely relevant in cross-border contexts. And although Irati managed to catch the interest of potential employers and was called back for several interviews, they refused to take on the administrative battle to hire her and to have her diplomas recognised, which would have taken up to several years in the worst case.

The main problem is the lack of recognition of regulated professions in the social, educational and health sectors between France and Spain, which makes cross-border employment mobility an almost impossible endeavour.

The Euroregion wanted to help young graduates and decided to set up the KOMPAR network in 2015 to support the employability of students in the cross-border area and to raise awareness on the obstacles they are facing when entering the job market on the other side of the border. Altogether, eleven vocational education centres between France and northern Spain are participating in the project, with the objective of shedding a light on how to get professional titles recognised in the neighbouring country. They also organise study visits and exchanges of good practices between French and Spanish professors or students.

Their participation in the *b-solutions* project also allowed the NAEN Euroregion to study each profession on a case-by-case basis and to come up with lists of requirements that are needed to get a professional title accredited and to identify which institution is in charge. Sometimes, the recognition simply means adding a six months internship or one subject/course that is required in the neighbouring country to exercise the profession in question.

For the next step, they have planned to meet the persons in charge of employment issues in each region as well as the certifying institutions to raise further awareness of these challenges and to work jointly on common solutions to facilitate the accreditation process.

Undoubtedly, the problem also occurs in other European countries, and the European Commission has recently set up a database⁴ to compare diplomas and professional requirements.

What kinds of solutions exist in the long-term?

Apart from raising awareness and lobbying among the diversity of actors in charge of accreditation and certification (which only works for precisely identified degrees), some legal measures can also be taken:

- A French-Spanish framework agreement would be a general solution allowing vocational training centres to validate skills and qualifications of diplomas and certificates that are not precisely regulated.
- Another solution could be to mutually validate degrees and professional qualifications between both countries. This would mean that when a Spanish professional looks for a job in France, he or she would be able to do so with their Spanish diploma or skills certificate without any further need for accreditation or certification.



In addition, the KOMPAR training centres are working with the local authorities on practical solutions to provide the missing requirements, such as internships or certain subjects/courses between both countries.

Until all of this is resolved, Irati and Franc ois are looking for a temporary solution to keep their relationship alive. The easiest option would be for Irati to look for a job in Spain and to embark on a long-distance relationship. Plan B could be to accept a less qualified non-regulated job in the field of early childhood education, which is not an easy decision for Irati, whose dream job was to work with young kids... To be continued...

⁴ European Commission. *The EU Single Market – Regulated professions database*, <https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/regprofil/index.cfm>.

A “free ride” for drivers between Germany and France



The car is packed and the Müller family from Karlsruhe in Germany is off for the weekend: they are going to visit friends in nearby Strasbourg on the other side of the border. When they return to their car on Sunday evening, they find an unpleasant surprise on the windscreen wiper: a warning note because they entered the city without having obtained a French vignette for their German car.

At the moment, the *circulation différenciée* (differentiated circulation) is announced only about once a year for about five days, when air pollution levels rise too high in Strasbourg. However, the city is planning to introduce an overall environmental zone for the entire urban area to start on January 1st, 2022. In practice, this means that drivers have to get the French and

the German vignette for their cars, indicating the exhaust emissions of their vehicles. There is no unified system because emission standards differ in France and Germany, and there is no mutual recognition of the neighbouring country's system. Consequently, the free movement of cars, people and eventually goods are hindered in the cross-border region. In the future, high fines will even be charged and by 2028, all diesel cars will be completely prevented from entering the city.

So, driving between Germany and France in the Eurodistrict Strasbourg – Ortenau is no longer such a carefree issue. Financially, this does not mean a major burden – the vignettes cost between EUR 4.21 and 20. But there are even some accessibility challenges, since the French vignette can only be purchased online by credit card.

All this seems to cause unnecessary trouble in today's united Europe.

“ There is this general lack of understanding for the citizens. We live together. We cross the border almost every day (before COVID-19). And everything is based on the same European legislation and on the vehicle class. So, if I already have a German vignette, why can't I use it in the French system, too? If all countries used their own vignette, at some point in the future the entire windshield would be full ”

states Dr. Lioba Markl-Hummel, Project Manager at the Strasbourg – Ortenau Eurodistrict, summarising the citizens' feelings.

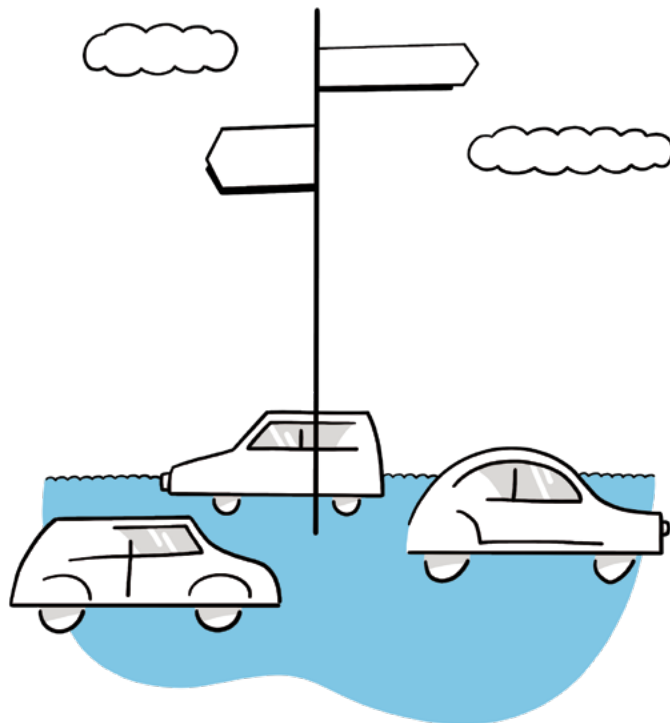


In the Upper Rhine region in particular, there is a historical bond and a strong will to increase the permeability of the border between Germany and France, and to work together to protect the environment.

The different vignette systems are even more bothersome, because when the Directive 2008/50/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 May 2008 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe⁵ was introduced, the idea was to harmonise standards across the European Union. However, the Directive was interpreted and implemented differently in every member state of the EU during the following years.

So, what are the possible solutions to the problem?

- **The European solution:** The Directive is currently under revision, and this could be the starting point for revisions of the common legal framework so that member states can develop a shared vignette system in the future.
- **The bilateral or multilateral solution:** a possible solution could be the development of a common vignette legal framework, in which the member states would need to modify their national legal framework to introduce mutual recognition.
- **The regional solution:** It would be possible to mutually recognise the vignettes within the cross-border region. However, amendments to the national law might also be necessary here if the competence lies at the national level.

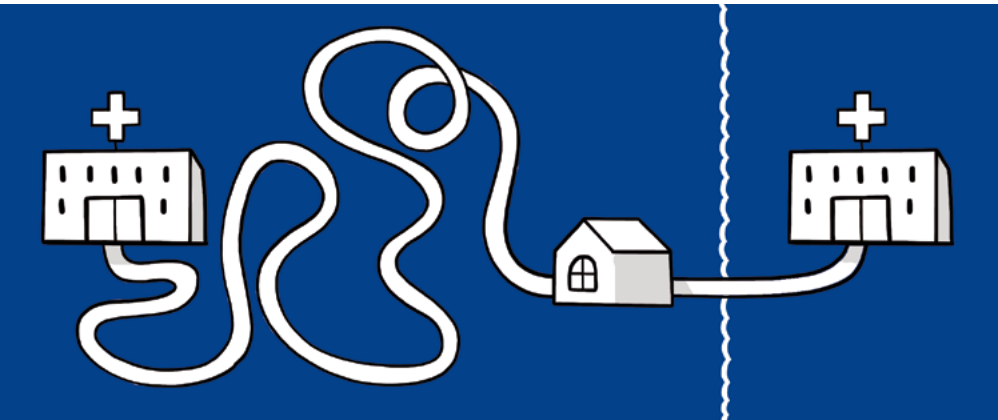


Alternative solutions allowing to introduce exceptions to the applicable law, for example recognising the legal provision of the neighbouring Member State, would also be very beneficial.

Through the *b-solutions* project, the Eurodistrict managed to put the topic on the political agenda: it was discussed during the last German–French Council of Ministers and some cross-border bodies in the region. For the moment, however, the issue is still up in the air and greatly depends on the political will and priorities in the two countries.

⁵ Directive 2008/50/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 May 2008 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe, *Official Journal L 152*, 11.6.2008, p. 1–44.

Ambulances without borders for better emergency services



Mrs. and Mr. De Jong have suffered from a heart condition for several years. In the last few months, Mr. De Jong has had more recurrent symptoms of discomfort in the chest and shortness of breath. While they both do their regular checks, he is increasingly worried about the shortage of services in the region if he needs to quickly reach an emergency room. He is aware that if he has a heart attack, the next 90 minutes are critical, and the closest hospital where he could be treated is across the border. How could emergency health services improve the needs of close-knit communities in different countries that happen to share a border?

While the idea that spurred this project took shape before the COVID-19 pandemic, it has no doubt become increasingly relevant. European governments and the health sector in particular had to face both an enormous amount of pressure and also considerable food for thought on aspects that could improve the delivery of emergency services.

Like many other places in Europe, Woensdrecht is a border municipality. It is located in the south of the Netherlands, bordering Belgium, and has a population of about 20 000 inhabitants. Antwerp, in the province of Noord-Brabant, is the biggest nearby city, about 25 kilometers away. Woensdrecht also shares a border with other Belgian municipalities: Essen, Kalmthout, Kapellen and Stabroek. All of these are comprised of a majority of small towns, which have experienced increasing difficulties in providing emergency health services to their citizens.

Medical emergencies and the need for medical assistance is much more frequent than was previously known. In some cases, ambulances from neighbouring countries can arrive faster than national ones, but it is not clear to which extent they can intervene to provide the necessary assistance due to diverging regulations in the two countries.

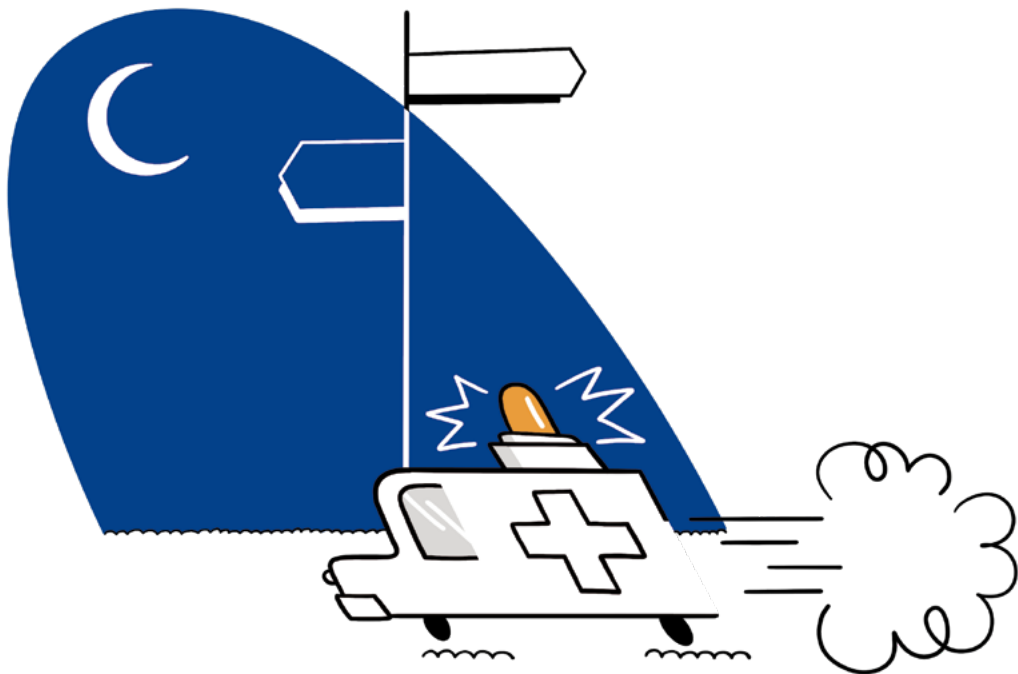
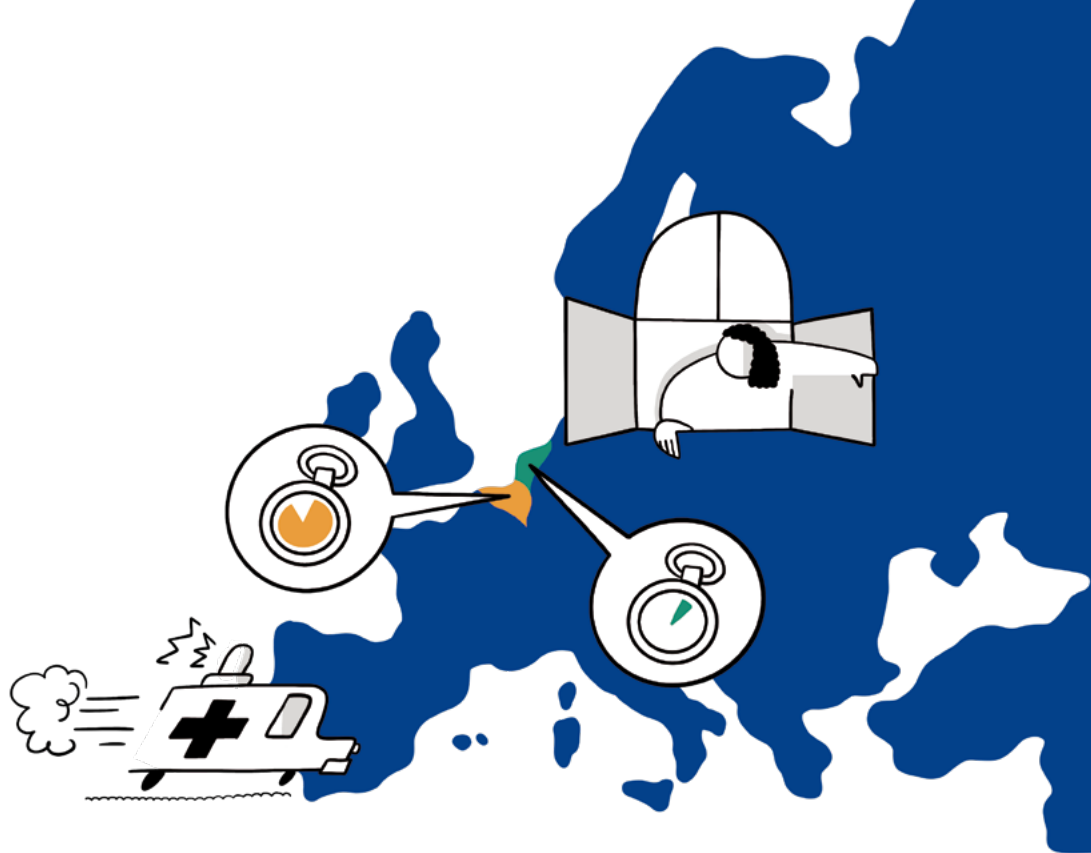
The case of Woensdrecht, unfortunately, reflects the reality in many other places in Europe, as reflected in the *b-solutions* compendium. While the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg) have a very long history of structured cooperation in many fields, including a legal mechanism for ambulance transport and cross-border cooperation, the experience of this municipality perfectly illustrates the fact that having legal instruments in place is not always enough. Aspects such as different



technical requirements, the lack of bilateral agreements and diverging standards (e.g., concerning patients' reimbursements) are hindering more efficient service and making it difficult to reach patients in cross-border areas.

At the moment, the municipalities involved are working to reformulate a system of cross-border medical assistance. **Martin Unfried**, from the **ITEM Institute** at **Maastricht University**, describes how

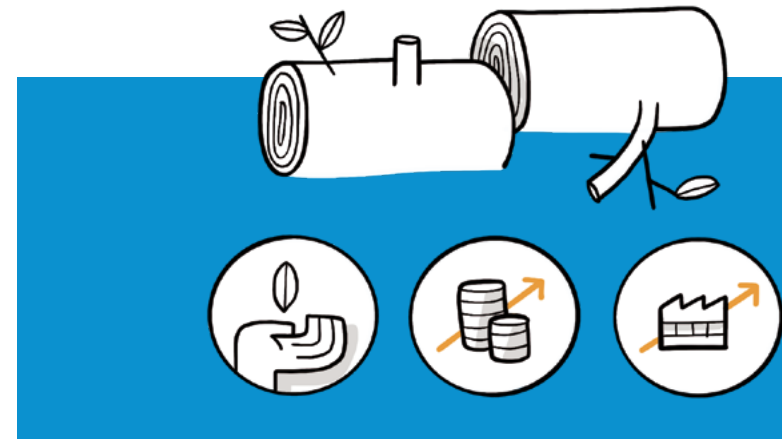
“ different stakeholders, including representatives from the municipalities, emergency services, hospitals, etc., have met regularly to discuss the right structure of the new cooperation, including how to build the necessary administrative capacities, install a secretariat that can coordinate, and determine how to keep the different partners interested to invest in a long-term solution. ”



b-solutions has been instrumental in gathering data, identifying stakeholders and searching for options. The next step, with the support of Interreg, is to develop a sustainable solution that partners are committed to, administered by a coordination unit that can ensure a more efficient system of medical assistance that addresses the needs of the people living in border regions between Belgium and the Netherlands.

Norwegian wood, or how to boost business across borders in Scandinavia

'I once had a girl, or should I say she once had me. She showed me her room, isn't it good, Norwegian wood?...'. We all may know the lines of the famous Beatles' song and indeed, wood construction has a long-standing tradition and is an essential part of life in both Norway and Sweden. Using wood in construction is beneficial, not only because it is a sustainable building material, but there is also a market potential and the opportunity to drive green growth in the Nordic region. Yet there are a number of barriers that both companies and workers in the construction field are facing today. Sweden and Norway have different building regulations and requirements for wood construction, which is at the heart of the issue, along with a lack of access to information on these regulations.



Jonas Hell, CEO and Co-Owner of Fridh & Hells Construction Company in Sweden, has staff who live in Sweden and perform work in Norway. However, the 6-month employment rule applies, which means that for longer projects, he must either replace the staff after six months or hire workers who live in Norway. Once the worker reaches the 6-month employment time limit, even if the project is not finished, the labour laws dictate that they must return to their country of residence; a practice that is making Jonas' projects on the other side of the border a difficult endeavour.

The different administrative procedures are also confusing for those trying to do business across the border, since finding out which rules apply in the other country is by no means an easy process. According to Jonas

“ not knowing exactly what applies in a Norwegian tender is an inhibiting factor. Uncertainty arises if we “step outside the checklist” and do not know what the costs will be. ”

For example, when a Norwegian company wants to do business in Sweden or vice-versa, some of the barriers they face include everything from financing, different bank rules, contracts, tender processes, permits, and more. Norway is part of the European Economic Area, which means the country is part of the internal market. The collaboration between Swedish and Norwegian customs at the EU border is excellent, setting the standard worldwide. However, companies doing cross-border business require even more practical information on how they can navigate the trade process.

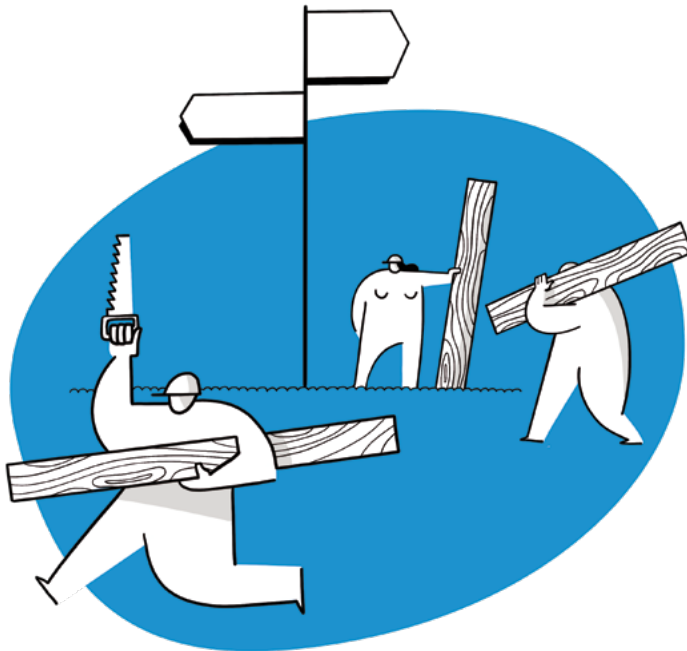
What are some of the potential solutions?

It is essential to harmonise the rules at the national level in each Nordic country, as the first step to eliminating some of the administrative and procedural barriers that companies face when doing business in this sector across the border. The main goal of harmonising the rules is to make it easier for companies to undertake construction projects on the other side of the border, hopefully overcoming the current barriers, and in this regard, further strengthening the sector and the small businesses that rely on it.

Work is also under way to implement a common platform for Nordic companies in the wood construction sector to provide information and help them navigate the cross-border process for doing business in the neighbouring countries.

How might the local or state authorities play a part in the solution?

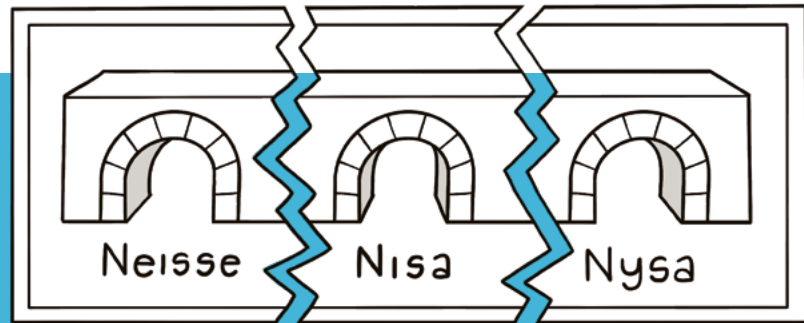
The Svinesund Committee, as the cross-border cooperation entity representing local governments in the border region, aims to continue raising awareness of this issue at the local and national levels. In general, cross-border entities can play a role in implementing projects and pilot actions, as well as facilitating a common Nordic information portal. Local authorities can also help businesses by acting as facilitators and providing guidance on practical issues, such as obtaining permits, etc.



At the regional level, this is a priority topic for the Nordic Council of Ministers, but stronger political commitment is needed, along with agreements and concrete actions.

For those in the wood construction industry, like Jonas Hell, harmonising the rules will make doing business across borders easier, therefore boosting competition, jobs and eventually driving green growth.

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.

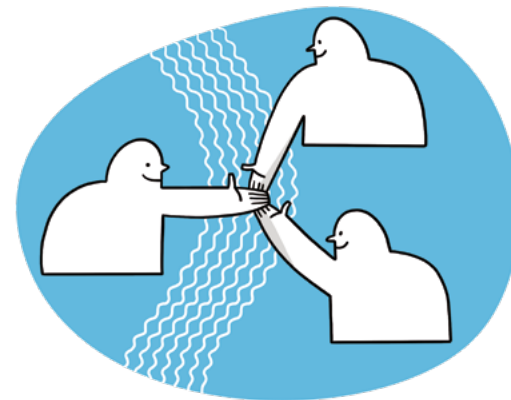
The idea was to build a bridge of symbolic rather than functional value, which would explicitly show that these territories were reunited and could also increase tourism. Ever since, the area around the bridge has been used for shared cultural and sports activities. Representatives from the three border 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.

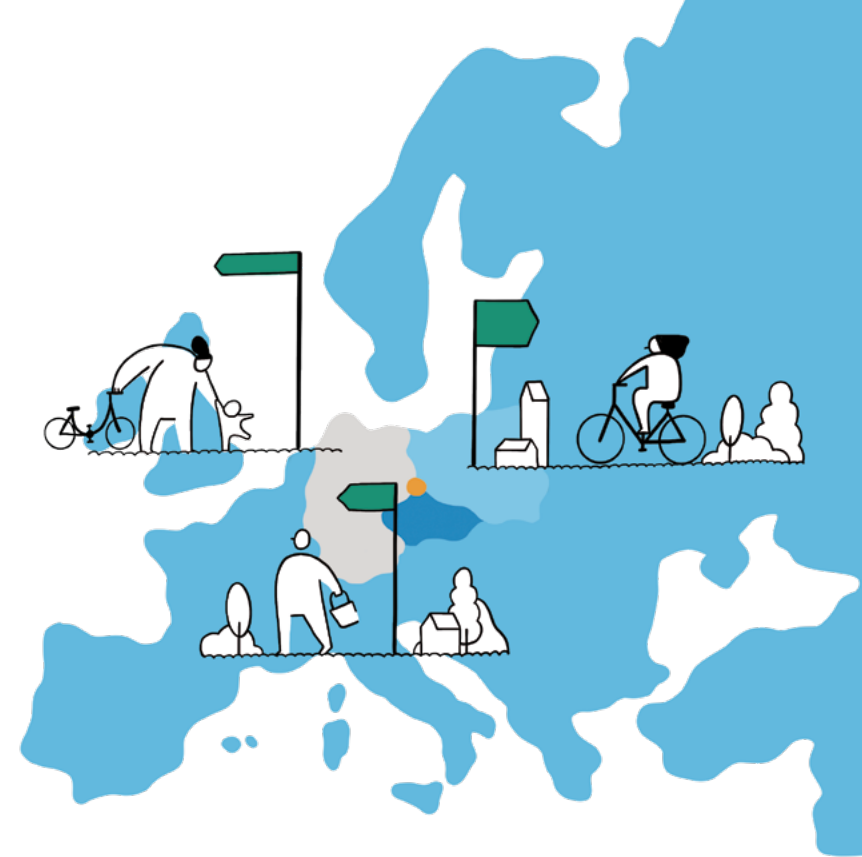
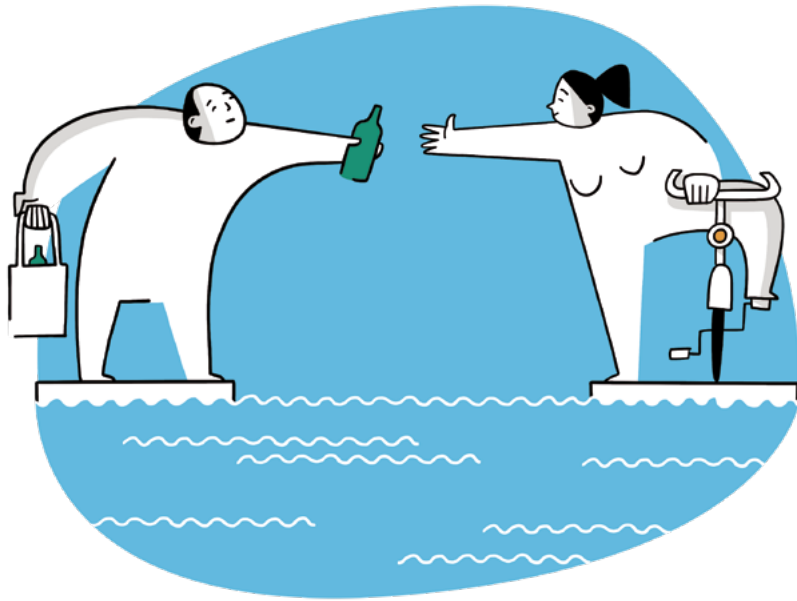
Due to the high costs, the Polish side delegated the project to the regional government of the Lower Silesian Voivodship and its Railway and Road Authority. On this basis, the initial project was developed in 2015. However, this created a sort of imbalance between the partners (two local authorities 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!

Less obstacles to cross-border food markets for happier local farmers



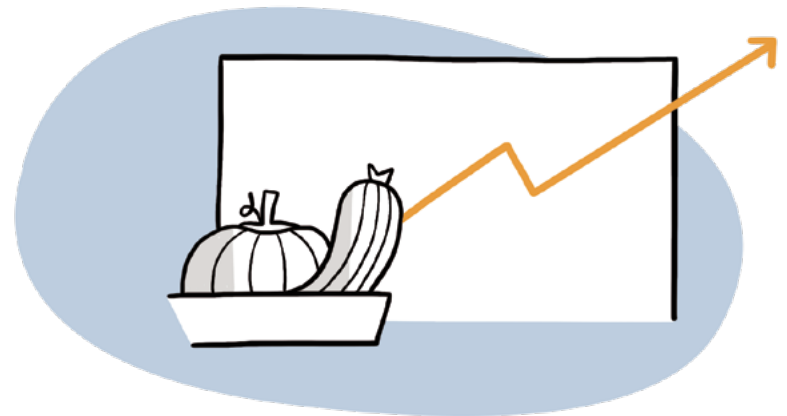
Small cities and villages at the border of Hungary and Romania are dependent on agriculture, with locally produced products and goods in high demand on both sides of the border. 35 representatives of towns along the border have joined forces to establish the Gate to Europe European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), in order to boost trade and economic development among its members across the border. Supporting small-scale farmers who grow sustainable food is part of the “km0” philosophy to boost local food systems and markets. However, the legal framework for cross-border direct sales of small-scale local products has not yet been developed, making it difficult to know which rules apply in each case.

Stefan and Sofia, two small-scale apple farmers from Romania, live in the Gate to Europe border region and wish to sell their produce in Hungary, since there is a strong demand for Romanian fruit in the Hungarian market. Due to its soil composition, the Hungarian section of the border region is more suited to growing vegetables, while the Romanian section is more suitable for growing fruit. Stefan and Sofia get to the border, hoping to join the local farmers’ market on the other side, only to find out that they have not obtained the correct Hungarian VAT permit on time to be able to sell there.

Their experience is just an example of the many local self-employed farmers in this region who lack sufficient information on how to cross the border with their products, which procedures to follow, as well as facing difficulties in accessing credit, obtaining selling permits, paying taxes and other administrative obstacles. In this sense, the opportunities of small producers are limited, and they must focus their sales on domestic markets in the absence of an opportunity to enter new markets across the border.

What are some of the potential solutions?

The experts involved in *b-solutions* proposed an innovative approach to promoting cross-border cooperation, with a high potential for replicability for other farmers and producers and to inspire additional projects. The main objective is to promote fairer access to local products by overcoming geographical constraints, in addition to easing the financial and administrative burdens and bureaucratic hurdles between the two countries. Overcoming these obstacles will improve access to fresh and locally grown food, thus contributing to sustainable food production chains and providing the consumer with more locally-grown options.

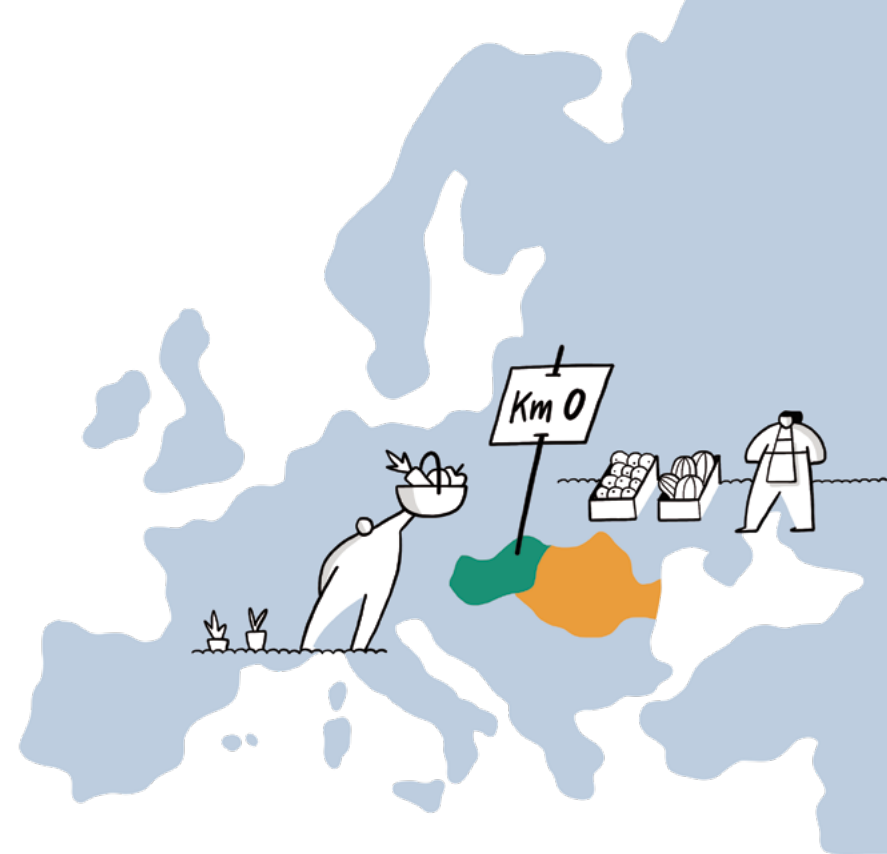
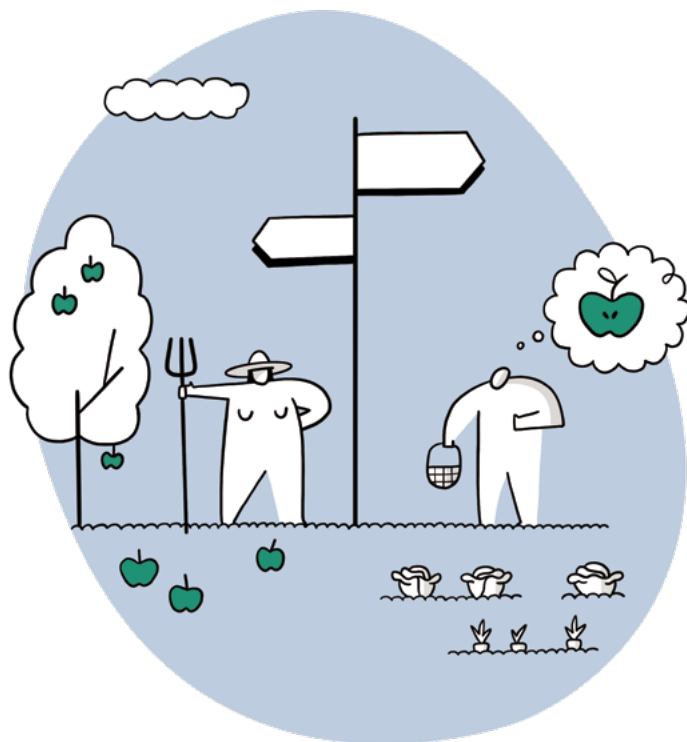


A bottom-up approach involves producers joining together, with the help of the regional chamber, building a relationship with their counterparts in the neighbouring country to share experiences and jointly work towards easing the administrative requirements. A top-down approach is also necessary, in which state and local authorities create a favourable environment to facilitate the market entry of small producers to directly sell their products across the border.

In addition to providing more information to the producers and farmers, greater access to funding is an essential first step, since having more capital would make it easier to work on tackling the current barriers and providing a way to boost their operations.

According to **Dr. Kres Tünde Tímea** of the **Gate to Europe EGTC**,

“ we believe that these agricultural projects need to be more open and accessible for everyone who is interested. Furthermore, the legislation should be simpler for everyone to understand. ”



Lastly, the possibility of being recognised as “local producers,” regardless of the national territory where their farmlands or orchards are located, would grant farmers and producers better access to the market in the cross-border region. Derogations to national laws in this sense would promote the participation of farmers like Stefan and Sofia in the local economy.

References

General

European Commission, Communication from the European Commission to the Council and the European Parliament – *Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions COM(2017) 534 final* of 20 September 2017.

European Commission, Report from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic And Social Committee and The Committee of the Regions – *Eu Border Regions: Living labs of European integration COM(2021) 393 final* of 14 July 2021.

Legal references – European Union

Directive 2008/50/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 May 2008 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe, *Official Journal L 152*, 11.6.2008, p. 1–44.

Websites

Association of European Border Regions. *b-solutions*, <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>.

European Commission. *The EU Single Market – Regulated professions database*, <https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/regprof/index.cfm>.

To learn more:

Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), European Commission, *b-solutions:solving border obstacles – A compendium of 43 cases*, 2020, available at: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>.

Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), European Commission, *b-solutions:solving border obstacles – A compendium of 43 cases – Annex*, 2020, available at: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>.

Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), European Commission, *b-solutions: Solving Border Obstacles – A Compendium 2020-2021*, 2021, available at: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>.

Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), European Commission, *Border Regions for the European Green Deal – Obstacles and solutions to cross-border cooperation in the EU*, 2021, available at: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>.

Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), European Commission, *More and better cross-border public services – Obstacles and solutions to cross-border cooperation in the EU*, 2021, available at: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>.

Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), European Commission, *Vibrant cross-border labour markets – Obstacles and solutions to cross-border cooperation in the EU*, 2021, available at: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>.



This publication tells the story of how the lives of the people and communities in border regions are still being affected today by national borders, and what kind of obstacles they are facing in their everyday professional or private lives.

For more details on each of these obstacles, two compendiums and specific thematic analyses provide precise information and insights on the legal frameworks of the 90 cases collected within the *b-solutions* initiative so far.

Visit:

<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/

<https://www.aebr.eu/>

Exchange on:

<https://futurium.ec.europa.eu/en/border-focal-point-network>

Like:

 <https://www.facebook.com/AEBR.AGEG.ARFE>

 <https://twitter.com/SocialnetAEBR>

Share:

#EUBorderRegions

#bsolutions

#CrossBorderCooperation