

## **Resolution of the European Committee of the Regions on a vision for Europe: The Future of Cross-border Cooperation**

(2021/C 440/02)

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. firmly believes in the high added value of cross border cooperation as an essential element of the European Union project and policies as it aims at enhancing territorial cohesion as well as links, exchanges and collaboration between territories and citizens across land and maritime borders;
2. is worried by the biggest setback for cross-border cooperation in past decades, which comes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; calls in light of the debate on the Future of the Europe on the European Union to put cross-border cooperation back to the top of the EU's policy agenda so that it can contribute to the recovery from the crisis;
3. following public consultations by the CoR on the future of cross-border cooperation, and after having consulted members of the European Cross-border Citizen's Alliance, proposes the following vision of cross-border cooperation over the coming years;

*Emergency services, healthcare and future crises*

4. calls on the European Commission to present a proposal for maintaining land and maritime cross-border cooperation and cross-border life in the event of an EU-wide or regionalised crisis. This proposal should envisage that internal EU borders will be kept open, ensuring the free movement of people, the delivery of cross-border public services and guarantee the full and smooth functioning of the single market and the Schengen area;
5. highlights that the European Union and its Member States should always timely consult local and regional authorities before considering border closures, or any type of action that might impact on citizens' lives; furthermore, any such action needs to respect the principle of proportionality and must not go beyond what is necessary to achieve the legitimately and transparently defined policy objectives;
6. underlines the need for residents in the European Union to get the quickest possible access to emergency and healthcare services; encourages the Member States to consider measures that would allow for the free passage across borders of personnel and vehicles working in the emergency services and healthcare;
7. suggests that Member States take account of cross-border cooperation when making changes to the activities of health and emergency services, or when planning or implementing new national, regional or local health plans. Moreover, EU health plans could be implemented and adhered to, as far as possible and depending on the cause of the emergency;
8. calls on Member States to create Joint Cross-Border Emergency Plans per border, or even per parts of the border, to ensure better preparedness and response in case of emergency. EU border regions, and specifically Euroregions, working communities, the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) and the other cross-border structures should be consulted when drafting such plans, with the possibility, where appropriate, of them being in charge of implementing or co-managing them;
9. pleads for a strong cooperation with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and competent regional authorities, notably through the establishment of local or regional cross-border health observatories;

*For more integrated cross-border regions*

10. calls on the European Union, in cooperation with its Member States and local and regional authorities, to promote the development of functional living areas in land and maritime cross-border areas of the Union and neighbouring countries, including in outermost regions, and consequently focus its future funding opportunities and policies on those areas;
11. calls on the European Commission to take the cross-border phenomenon into account based on a cross-cutting approach when drawing up its policies;

12. calls on the European Commission, and in particular EUROSTAT, as well as the relevant national Statistical Offices, to systematically gather statistical data on life in cross-border areas, mapping out cross-border flows and interdependencies in all relevant policy areas and public life, in order to provide concrete evidence for future policy-making;

13. requests Member States to look into establishing joint strategies for integrated cross-border areas and foresee dedicated resources for the development of cross-border projects, spatial planning, infrastructure, economic strategies and an integrated labour market. Funding for the development and implementation of these strategies would be provided as part of INTERREG under the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework;

14. considers that all European Commission services should be aware of the existence of EGTCs. The European Committee of the Regions accordingly calls on the European Commission to ensure that EGTCs are acknowledged as legal entities and are eligible for all EU calls for projects;

15. stresses that environmental health (air, soil and water quality) and the health of the inhabitants of border areas should be further protected, in order to avoid pollution and industrial risks generated on the other side of the border;

16. to enable frictionless cross-border life, the CoR urges the European Commission to engage in dialogue with the Member States to find effective ways of mutually recognising the qualifications and rights of individuals and businesses;

*Improving cross-border transport and communication links*

17. calls for support for better cross-border connectivity and intermodality in land and maritime borders through adequate funding and strategic planning. Instruments like the Connecting Europe Facility should always include specific calls for closing cross-border missing links, even beyond the TEN-T core network. Long term investments through the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the national promotional banks and institutions (NPBIs) should also provide funding for cross-border projects and INTERREG should increase its participation in financing these transport bottlenecks in its operational programmes;

18. underlines that all solutions aimed at decarbonising cross-border flows should be promoted more ambitiously in order to reach the climate targets by 2030 and climate neutrality by 2050. This also includes the development of common fare policies or ticketing systems, harmonisation of timetables and making information accessible to passengers;

19. in light of the challenges faced by insular, mountainous, and peripheral areas, also wishes to highlight the importance of cross-border cooperation programmes to ensure territorial continuity and cross border mobility, sustainable management of natural resources and support the decarbonisation of energy system and circular economy in the regions and sea basin concerned;

20. emphasises that more attention and funding should be given to cross-border IT connection projects, access to broadband networks and use of Artificial Intelligence tools which would support economic and social cooperation between cross-border regions, paying particular attention to the needs of rural areas;

*Developing cross-border services*

21. underlines the need for an EU policy framework to allow for the efficient establishment and management of cross-border public services, which would address the needs of EU residents living in border regions, taking into account in particular the needs of residents of cross-border regions facing demographic challenges and in so doing preventing these regions from continuing to become depopulated by giving them access to high-quality public services. Cross-border public services (CPS), for residents and businesses, should be developed in all relevant fields for cross-border life;

22. calls on EU border regions, and specifically Euroregions, working communities, EGTCs and other cross-border structures, to proactively look across borders to find synergies, possible economies in terms of resources, and complimentary services in order to create an attractive offer for citizens and tourists on both sides of the border;

23. underlines the need for improved access to, and distribution of, audio-visual content by limiting geo-blocking in particular in border regions, which would also benefit linguistic minorities;

24. stresses that the reduction of administrative burden is particularly relevant for businesses operating in border regions and commits therefore to prioritising the issue within the Fit for Future platform with relevant proposals in areas such as public procurement and digital-procurement tools and processes; highlights the importance of digitalisation in the development of the cross-border provision of public services, taking into account in this regard three key aspects: the productive fabric, public administrations and bodies that provide services to citizens, and citizens themselves;

25. calls on the European Commission to draft a legislative framework to facilitate the adoption by border States of statutes for cross-border workers;

*Developing integrated cross-border labour markets*

26. underlines that in very interlinked cross-border regions, co-development is needed to ensure cohesion and sustainable growth. This requires an integrated territorial strategy, a fair distribution of the incomes generated by cross-border work and cross-border funding of the cross-border infrastructure and public services needed to ensure the functioning of the cross-border region;

27. requests improved promotion and better facilitation of cross-border cooperation on mobility for the purposes of education, training and employment. For individuals, this type of mobility improves employment prospects, contributes to openness to the world and strengthens European citizenship;

28. stresses that education systems, including at universities, adult and vocational education institutes in border regions, should offer opportunities to learn neighbouring languages as early as possible and in the concept of 'lifelong learning', with curricula adapted to meet the current and future needs of the labour market;

*Strengthening cross-border governance*

29. asks that cross-border structures, such as Euroregions, working communities and cross-border EGTCs, be given a more prominent role in managing cross-border areas and that they be consulted regularly on all aspects of cross-border life. Member States and LRAs should establish working methods to enable different cross-border structures, so as to ensure this;

*Developing a common sense of identity across borders*

30. highlights that cross-border cooperation is not only about economic cooperation but also about living in border regions and developing a sense of common identity. A culture-based approach should be developed that highlights the richness of the heritage — both tangible and intangible — shared by cross-border regions, offering citizens an opportunity to interact regularly and socialise with their neighbours, building mutual trust, which remains a key obstacle to cross-border cooperation. In this respect, people-to-people projects, in particular to strengthen intercultural exchange, are extremely important as they enhance neighbourly cooperation, which is what matters most to citizens as it is part of their everyday lives. Special attention should also be given to the diversity of the population, and appropriate means should be sought to apply an inclusive approach;

31. supports the creation of an 'EU-Digital Cross-border Service Card' and reminds the co-legislators that the initial idea behind the services e-card is to reduce the administrative complexity and costs for cross-border service providers, and particularly SMEs, when fulfilling administrative formalities;

32. calls on the European Union, Member States and LRAs to support the organisation of regular cultural, educational and sporting cross-border events and festivals; stresses that youth volunteering and youth involvement in cross-border and European cooperation initiatives should be further developed, completing the INTERREG Volunteer Youth (IVY) initiative and the European Solidarity Corps;

33. is of the opinion that the European Union should encourage the development of universal automated translation devices, which are particularly useful in cross-border areas;

*Better regulation for stronger border regions*

34. emphasises that the European Union has adopted many pieces of legislation and treaties that have the potential to significantly improve lives of citizens living in border regions, but their implementation and follow-up is deficient; urges the European Commission to review the implementation of existing legislation and to strengthen follow-up capacity, with a view to ensuring that it is properly implemented at all levels;

35. asks the European Commission to propose an instrument for coordination between Member States during the transposition of EU directives, so as to prevent the creation of new legal obstacles at borders;

36. calls on the European Commission and Member States to carry out cross-border territorial impact assessments on all relevant legislative proposals with potential cross-border impact, in order to avoid creating new obstacles in cross-border regions;

37. calls on the European Commission to propose revisions or clarifications to the Schengen Agreement, especially the provisions that allow Member States to close borders or introduce additional administrative requirements for their crossing;

38. deeply regrets that the discussions between Member States on the proposed European Cross-Border Mechanism (ECBM) failed, as the proposal included considerable progress for cross-border cooperation. As the cross-border legal and administrative obstacles put serious limits to cross-border cooperation and to the quality of life in border regions, the CoR calls for a new Commission initiative revising the ECBM regulation taking into account issues raised earlier by Member States. The CoR volunteers to organise the discussions prior to this new regulation proposal with the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Member States, regional and local authorities and all other stakeholders interested in the topic;

39. asks the European Commission and the Member States to recognise the role played by Euroregions as a key tool in European integration and cohesion by forging a Euroregional identity, adopting joint strategies, working to eliminate the associated costs and through neighbourly cooperation. Therefore, calls for the role of Euroregions in cross-border cooperation to be developed and promoted by giving them greater financial support;

#### *Improving European Territorial Cooperation*

40. calls on the European Union to revise the Multiannual Financial Framework during its mid-term review by dedicating considerably more funding to the INTERREG programmes and European Territorial Cooperation;

41. requests a considerable continued simplification of the INTERREG projects and underlines that they should be flexible enough to address the real needs of cross-border areas; calls on the Programme Management Bodies of INTERREG programmes to further avoid any gold plating. Unnecessary administrative procedures and some controls and audits that occur too frequently should be abandoned, as the current burden makes cross-border projects unfeasible or undesirable for many LRAs and other entities;

42. for the 2021-2027 period, all the geographical areas of cross-border cooperation need to remain as they were in the 2014-2020 period, with no territories disappearing that are eligible for the various cross-border cooperation programmes without justification;

43. calls on EU border regions and INTERREG programmes to invest more resources in people-to-people (P2P) projects or microprojects — which can be managed through regular calls or by creating a ‘Small Project Fund’ — in the border regions in order to increase the possibilities for encounters and mutual trust-building activities and suggests also a closer interaction and cooperation of cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation;

44. underlines the importance of synergies and complementarities between cross-border cooperation actions and European funding programmes under direct, indirect and, notably, shared management;

45. points out that, as part of the INTERREG programmes, the Union should finance the further training of officials working in border regions on the basis of cross-border cooperation, and offer Erasmus-like exchange and language-learning programmes for civil servants in cross-border regions in order to strengthen cooperation across-borders;

46. stresses the CoR's commitment to cooperate with Member States EU institutions and relevant stakeholders in delivering on the proposals outlined in this Resolution;

47. emphasises that the proposals made in this Resolution aim to contribute to the discussions at the Conference on the Future of the Europe; invites, in this respect, local and regional authorities of border regions to organise cross-border citizens' dialogues and permanent consultation mechanisms where citizens could provide contributions for the Conference on the Future of Europe;

*The external dimension of cross-border cooperation*

48. recalls the important role that cross-border cooperation, and permanent cross-border structures such as Euroregions, working communities and EGTCs, can play in achieving sustainable development across external borders, contributing to stronger EU cooperation with its neighbours, supporting local and regional governments, promoting enhanced security and improving socio-economic development. Local and regional authorities along the EU's external land and maritime borders should intensify cooperation with their neighbours in non-EU countries for the benefit of both sides, by developing common infrastructure, strengthening socio-economic cooperation and intensifying cultural exchange, as well as enabling the establishment of joint services that would benefit citizens in that border area;

49. calls for consideration of cross-border cooperation between European, national, regional and local authorities as a key element in the long-term resolution of humanitarian crises in Europe and in its neighbourhood;

50. highlights the key role of the cross-border PEACE programme at the Irish-Northern Irish border in the peace process and regrets the decision of the UK government to withdraw from the participation in other programmes of European Territorial Cooperation. Building on successful work carried by INTERREG programmes covering the North Sea area, the CoR sees the promotion of future cross-border projects and structures as an important step towards maintaining strong links with UK cities and regions, even without formal involvement in EU cooperation programmes;

51. points out that the EU's external borders extend to the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the west coast of Africa, as there are European outermost regions in these areas. These areas are very exposed to risks and emergencies related to migratory movements, illicit trafficking, natural disasters, health crises, and so on. Unlike other external borders in its neighbourhood, the EU has not developed joint strategies for these areas; calls on the EU to take this further and draw up action plans for each of these areas, strengthening cooperation with neighbouring countries and taking advantage of the strategic potential of the presence of European outermost regions in these areas.

Brussels, 1 July 2021

*The President*  
*of the European Committee of the Regions*  
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS

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