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Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)
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Final Declaration

Pan-European Cross-Border Cooperation:
The European Union, the Russian Federation
and the Neighbourhood and Pre-Accession Countries

AEBR Annual Conference
Kursk, 22-24 September 2011

In 2011 the AEBR commemorates its 40th anniversary in the Russian Federation, City of Kursk (Euroregion Yaroslavna). Many things have happened in European border regions since this foundation at the Westphalian Anholt Castle on 17th and 18th June 1971 by ten enthusiastic border regions. It was a long way up to the present moment, where some two hundred euroregions, working communities, eurocities, eurodistricts and EGTCs stake out European boundaries within and without the EU. These structures have made their best to strengthen European integration at the most challenging scenarios in a daily basis. From Barents to the Mediterranean, and from Porto to Yerevan, European border regions have decidedly made an extraordinary input to promote territorial cohesion and to remove border barriers through their active participation in thousands of cross-border cooperation actions, projects, programmes and strategies. And this has been acknowledged by most European institutions.

Many years ago, the AEBR began to extend its membership across the borders of the EU. This also happened during the nineties, when many cross-border structures in the accession countries joined our Association, were trained in European affairs, particularly on Cohesion and Territorial matters. They also learned how to implement new and existing cooperation possibilities with their neighbours in environmental issues, emergencies, cross-border transport links, health, tourism, innovation, etc. Most of them are nowadays very relevant actors in the new EU internal borders, and others have also promoted cross-border cooperation at the new external borders, and far beyond.

Since 1971 the AEBR has been representing the interests of border regions, particularly but not exclusively its member regions, towards European authorities and institutions, as well as towards national and other international authorities. Within the AEBR network of around a hundred members:

- there is a regular exchange of experience and information;
- opportunities and difficulties in the field of cross-border cooperation are being investigated throughout Europe; and
- cooperation is being initiated, supported and coordinated.

During the recent years, conditions for cross-border cooperation have not only changed, but improved enormously: The European Union has grown continuously, which resulted in changes at border areas. New programmes appeared and increased their weight, while strengthening the conditions and capacities in most European border regions, both at the internal and external boundaries of the EU. New external borders appeared, and many former external borders have become internal ones. European support for cross-border cooperation has developed continuously (INTERREG, ENPI, IPA, Partnership Instrument), Territorial Cooperation has become a European Objective in 2007, and border regions have been included specifically in the Lisbon Treaty as challenging areas. Actually, INTERREG programmes have been a fundamental opportunity for the acceleration of the development of European regions and municipalities in general, and border regions in particular. Cohesion Policy, Territorial Cohesion and the Territorial Cooperation Objective confirm the political will of the EU to support the development of all European territories. This was included in the Lisbon Strategy and has been acknowledged in the Treaty of Lisbon and in the elaboration of the EU 2020 Strategy. However, border regions' main objective is still to reach a prosperous and balanced development in their areas and to remove remaining and upcoming obstacles. In fact, during the past years, several generations of obstacles have been identified:

1. **Reduction of border hindrances** on the ground and in people's minds: barriers, border control and prejudices towards the neighbouring country get reduced; bridges and road links are constructed.
2. A result of this new freedom is **mobility**. People cross the borders more often for work, study or casual reasons and are to face a foreign system. This increased mobility reveals a new character of hindrances: employment and taxation issues in case of border commuters, insurance issues in case of patients looking for care in the neighbouring country, acknowledgement of diplomas, etc. Due to the fact that there is no complete harmonisation of legislation in Europe, the main aim to tackle this second generation of obstacles is to create compatibilities.

3. The **management of cross-border merging areas** could be considered the third level. Border regions position themselves more and more as related joint metropolitan or polycentric metropolitan regions in order to get more visibility and be more attractive for European competition. Surrounding rural areas also need centers for administrative and business management, intermodal logistic knots to transfer merchandises and passengers, reference hospitals, universities and research centres, etc. All of this reinforces the role of intermediate capitals in border regions, as well as their challenges, being necessary real cross-border urban-rural partnerships. These can only happen if they are supported both by European, national and regional strategic approaches. This is, therefore, a perfect example of Multi-level Governance.

This is a crucial moment for border and cross-border regions within the EU, in the Neighbourhood countries and in the Russian Federation. To fulfil the expectations of all European border regions, a cornerstone for European integration, understanding and cooperation, it is necessary to keep the current Territorial Cooperation Objective and to make it even bigger. It is also necessary that the Neighbourhood Policy progresses up to an effective Eastern Partnership, involving all European border and cross-border regions, as it has been demanded by the AEER, and promoted by the EU institutions and many States involved. In fact, it is necessary to develop and implement a sustainable strategy for efficient CBC in a Pan-European scenario. The members of the AEER, met in the Euroregion Yaroslavna (RU/UA), have agreed to work together in this direction, basing their actions on the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity and partnership.

Kursk, 23rd September 2011