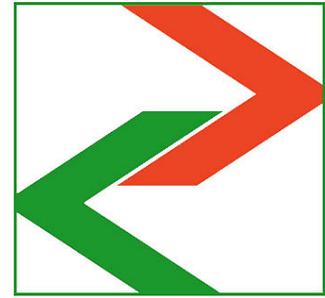


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Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)  
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## **Annual Conference of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)**

**Liège, 8 November 2013**

**“Cross-Border Urban and Rural Integrated Areas – Challenges and Chances“**

### **Final Declaration**

Border Regions in European States have progressively succeed ever better in overcoming their national remoteness in the European Single Market. Cross-border cooperation, often with European support, such as through INTERREG, contributes significantly to guarantee economic, social and particularly territorial cohesion in the EU generally and also in the current crisis. Local and regional authorities, economic actors and many social groups in European border regions play an important role as to strengthen cross-border integration of cities and rural areas on both sides of the border.

In the global competition urban agglomerations and cities together with the surrounding rural area assign themselves more and more to economic regions, defining themselves as “City-region branding”, in order to create common urban-rural identities and attract investors. Both cities and rural areas benefit from this strategy. This applies, too, to cross-border urban and rural integrated areas. Quite often an important European regional centre (for example Szczecin, Salzburg, Trieste, Innsbruck, Santiago de Compostela, Thessaloniki, Sevilla, Badajoz) together with rural areas in the neighbouring country forms a common cross-border integrated area; in some cases a European metropolitan, cross-border integrated area and regional centre is located on both sides of a border (for example Vienna/Bratislava, Aachen/Maastricht/Liège or Copenhagen/Malmö).

The separating impacts of European borders are step by step overcome by the work done by European border regions and by its umbrella organisation, the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR). Cooperation at several levels contributes to cohesion and to development of cross-border regions and helps to cope with challenges in the framework of implementation of the Europe2020 Strategy, caused among others by the territorial fragmentation of the EU (due to historic factors, national standards and laws). Cross-border policies for integrated areas can help to cope with current challenges in European border regions, such as ageing population, youth unemployment, migration or weak innovation, which cannot be adequately addressed by isolated national measures at either side of the border.

AEBR stresses that still the full potential of cross-border cooperation in integrated areas is not used: in the fields of health care, innovation, research and development, infrastructure, public services, as well as for achieving a “critical mass” for common investments and for avoidance of investment errors or environmental protection and networking of protected areas of nature and landscape. These potentials need to be mobilized, not only for the realization of the ambitious objectives of the Europe2020 Strategy, but first of all for the realization of sustainable added values for the cross-border region itself.

To this end, the European border regions propose the following actions:

1. European Cohesion policy should use even more the new opportunities of developing integrated areas, in order to enable all border regions (including those less developed and the rural regions) to contribute – according to their possibilities – to the implementation of the Europe 2020 objectives and to promote their development. In its next cohesion report the European Commission should analyse the strengths and weaknesses of cross-border regions. Such an analysis could show at which external and internal borders of the EU there exists a particular need for action.  
At external borders in particular citizenfriendly solutions need to be elaborated with regard to border procedures (common institutions with common staff) and visa practice (for example 72 hours visafree stay in the neighbouring border region according to initiatives launched by Kaliningrad and Ukraine).
2. The EU Members States should continue the preparation of the “Urban Agenda” in close cooperation with each other and with the European Commission, the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee, as well as with the main European regional associations. The Urban Agenda should have high political priority because of the concentration of current problems in cities (ageing population, youth unemployment, migration, refugees). However, it needs to be borne in mind that urban and rural areas not only belong together, but influence and need each other. This is why the Urban Agenda should also be seen as an eminent political instrument with regard to the implementation of the Territorial Agenda of the EU, stressing the necessity of a well balanced development of urban and rural areas, based on mutual solidarity. Both political objectives are the two sides of one coin: it is all about strengthening the territorial dimension of the EU2020 Strategy. Both the European Commission and the EU Members States are invited to pay more attention within the Urban Agenda to cities and municipalities in European cross-border integrated areas (as the cement of the European house), taking into consideration their specific territorial situation.

3. Many cross-border integrated areas understand the future challenges as an opportunity for own initiatives. A baseline condition is good national and cross-border infrastructural integration by roads, rail and airports (this applies in particular to external borders and border regions in Southern Europe). If they succeed in addition to realize a uniform cross-border public transport network and a coherent regional transport network with a uniform pricing/ticketing system across the borders, this contributes to an economic reinforcement of the integrated areas of cities, metropolises and rural areas situated near the border (wider scope as labour market regions). This helps to reduce urban problems (unemployment, lack of qualification) in areas situated near the border and to avoid outflows from rural areas towards urban agglomerations (place of residence/workplace). The European Commission is invited to inspire the formation and development of transport associations in border regions by means of appropriate case studies in order to support the efforts of border regions.
4. Cross-border cooperation in education and especially in professional training increases the level of qualification and language competence of the young generation in cross-border integrated areas. In future this will be an important positive location factor for border regions that increases further the mobility across borders, something that is currently often hindered by lack of language competence. All schools and professional training providers are invited to reinforce bilingual education in cross-border integrated areas. In this sense, the relevant national and regional authorities as well as trade associations should show an even stronger commitment in border regions.
5. In future, in cross-border integrated areas direct cross-border cooperation in the field of health care and between universities and higher education institutions will become more and more important, in particular in the field of innovation, research and development. As examples from different parts of Europe (smart specialisation) show, this is an important development potential for urban-rural cross-border integrated areas that needs to be mobilized with the support of the European Commission in the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy.
6. The legal basis of cross-border cooperation in integrated areas at many European internal and external borders needs to be strengthened. Therefore the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and the Council to amend the regulation on the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) is endorsed. National governments are invited to support the amendment and to implement it in the short term. All governments of EU Member States are invited to support the efforts of local and regional authorities situated at an internal or external border of the EU that can benefit from the better possibilities offered by the new regulation and Protocol no. 3 to the Outline Convention on transfrontier cooperation of the Council of Europe.

The assembled European border regions thank the Chairman of Euroregion Meuse-Rhine and his staff for the successful organisation of this Annual Conference and would be glad if he, as Chairman of the conference and President of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) would present this final declaration to the European institutions, governments of Members States of the European Union and the Chambers of Economy.