

AEBR TASK FORCE CROSS-BORDER CULTURE

I) General

Europe is a patchwork of 28 different countries. However, a patchwork can only be as strong as the weakest of its seams. The seams of the patchwork "Europe" are the European border regions.

European Capitals often regard border regions as less important peripheral areas.

It is easily overlooked that European border regions represent 40% of Europe's total territory and that 35% of the European population live in these border regions.

These regions are, however, not only relevant for European cohesion in terms of numbers, they are also of special strategic importance: Europe must grow closer together, also at its borders!

Thus, the border regions represent both a challenge and an opportunity for Europe.

It is a challenge due to the fact that these regions are reminders of barely healed scars of history, where certain old resentments still exist. Exactly these regions should and have to become Europe's welding points!

A challenge also because the socio-economic development of these border regions is often hindered - not only due to the fact that they are situated far away from national decision-making bodies - but also because the border itself hinders their development: On the other side of the border, a different legal system applies, and administrative processes are not comparable. Mentality, culture and language often differ considerably, thereby consolidating the mental borders. Here, it is our task to build bridges across cultural and administrative differences.

At the same moment, border regions are also a chance for Europe. They are meeting points for different European cultures. Thanks to this multicultural and multilingual setting there is an abundance of creative and unifying cultural potential simply waiting to be used.

II) History of the AEBR Task Force Cross-Border Culture

On the initiative of Euregio Meuse-Rhine (EMR), the AEBR Executive Committee discussed on the occasion of its meeting held in Istanbul on May 18, 2012 the possibilities of cultural cooperation between AEBR member regions.

Background for this discussion was the fact that three cities from three different AEBR member regions had submitted an application for a European Capital of Culture in their cross-border regions: Donostia 2016 and the Basque region (ES/FR), Sonderburg 2017 and Sonderjylland-Schleswig (DK/DE), and finally Maastricht 2018 and the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (NL/DE/BE).

The general consensus was that the AEBR could also contribute to the continued process of European integration in terms of culture. The aim is to promote awareness, acceptance and respect for the cultural differences and diversity of European peoples with the support of AEBR members.

The mental borders that still exist need to be overcome and understanding for the neighbouring countries' culture of others needs to be created. The idea was to bring together creative artists and cultural audiences across borders, thereby unlocking the border regions' multicultural potential and making it available to everyone.

The AEBR should, however, begin the cross-border cultural exchange with help of other partners, such as the European Capitals of Culture or similar networks.

It was proposed to establish an AEBR Task Force Cross-Border Culture and to hold the inaugural meeting on the occasion of the AEBR General Assembly in November in Berlin.

An open workshop took place on November 8, 2012 in Berlin. Cultural operators from non-member regions also participated in this workshop and the following expectations of the AEBR and its future task force were agreed upon:

1. The AEBR aims to bring together cultural operators and networks from European border regions and to set up a European cultural network for border regions.
2. The AEBR aims to establish contacts with influential political organisations and networks to call attention to the cultural sector on a European level.
3. It was also mentioned that contacts with other cultural operators and networks need to be established, i.e., when it comes to calls for proposals on a European level.
4. In order to keep the cooperation with other networks as open and flexible as possible, there should not be a new bureaucratic structure.
5. Many cultural operators are often unable to attend meetings or workshops due to the cost of travel and accommodation. In this context, the possibilities of the programme "Creative Europe" (2014-2020) were mentioned.

III) Launching, management, members

On 9 November 2012, these proposals were adopted by the AEBR General Assembly and the Task Force Cross-Border Culture was launched. The representative of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, Rudolf Godesar, was chosen as task force coordinator.

Each member of the AEBR can be a member of the Task Force Cross-Border Culture, if desired.

Following the expectations defined under point 4 above, representatives of other European cultural networks should also be able to join the Task Force CB Culture if necessary. Also Sonderburg's (2017) and Maastricht's (2018) applications for European Capital of Culture until September 2013 (Maastricht) were supported this way.

IV. Approach and working levels

In order to implement these tasks and to choose the target audience, several workshops, brainstorming sessions and consultations with cultural operators and other European cultural networks took place.

A network of cultural facilitators in border regions

It emerged during these discussions that it would most probably be asking too much of persons engaged in the cultural sector and those involved in culture to create a cross-border cultural network. This network would aim to combine and use the border regions' creative potential and to facilitate access to the "culture of others" for people in border regions. Not these persons have to be brought together on a European level, but rather the cultural actors and representatives of cultural networks in border regions, those who are familiar with their region's cultural scene as well as with the political and economic environment. These are the so-called "facilitators" who represent their region's cultural scene and have a clear idea of what is feasible and realistic in terms of cross-border cooperation and know who is doing what.

It is necessary to find these "facilitators" with the help of AEBR partner regions and to bring them together so that they can cooperate on a transnational and European scale. The unique insight and contribution provided by one border region can offer enrichment for another region's creative artists and audiences.

A cooperation platform with great European cultural networks

However, it also became clear that success can be multiplied if this network of facilitators is also connected to different existing European networks. The idea is to cooperate closely with influential European cultural networks, linking local and national political decision-makers and networks supporting cultural cooperation on a European level, and to form clusters.

In this context, the idea emerged to create a "cultural platform", a kind of open European cultural meta network of decision makers and supporters, to which other networks delegate a representative, and to tie it to the AEBR task force Cross-Border Culture.

Potential partners include: EUNIC - the European National Institutes for Culture network, the Council of Europe's European Cultural Routes, the "Les Rencontres" network linking political experts of European Capitals and Regions of Culture

At the same time, the network should also be tied to other European organisations and networks with goals similar to those of the AEBR, such as: Cultural Space Greater Region, On the Move (focus on creative people and artists' mobility), SMART (which establishes a kind of social secretariat for creative people and artists),

This European cooperation platform should make it easier to recognize cooperation potential between the large networks and to establish links, where yet missing. For instance, a cluster connecting EUNIC, the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes, "Les Rencontres", and others would enhance the impact of the AEBR's task force Cross-Border Culture considerably. Each individual border region could assess which partners these networks already have in their region, how these partners could be integrated in a cross-border and transnational cultural cooperation and how local clusters could be formed.

One possibility would be to promote the creation of such clusters specifically in the border regions along the "Via Regia" – one of the Council of Europe's most important Cultural Routes. Other organisations such as SMART or On the Move could also be involved in this process and help to improve mobility and social security of creative artists.

As representatives of EUNIC, European Cultural Roads, Cultural Space Greater Region, "Les Recontres", and SMART attended the Task Force's 4 or 5 most recent meetings, this cultural platform already exists in its basic form.

The following networks have also been contacted and have shown some interest: the Assembly of European Region's Committee on Culture, On the Move, and the cultural commission of cities bordering on the Baltic Sea ...

Results-oriented cooperation

The success of the activities could be measured in number and quality of the projects and initiatives that are developed or brought together throughout European border regions every year must. Additionally, the extent of these projects' contributions to a border region's cultural and socio-economic development has to be taken into consideration as well. The quality of the projects is also revealed by its added value for the border regions concerned. Did the project bring the border regions and their citizens closer together? Has progress been made in terms of understanding and interest towards the "otherness" of the neighbours? Have there been cultural, economic, or social impacts in border regions? Sustainability is another factor for the added value. An activity can be considered successful if people truly meet, interact and learn from each other, working together across borders on a long-term basis. The extent to which border regions influence and enrich each other must be a determining factor of success.

IV) The task force Cross-Border Culture as coordinating group

Structure:

The AEBR task force Cross-Border Culture should be a small, unbureaucratic coordinating group in order to ensure high efficiency and to meet the original aims stated on the occasion of the inaugural meeting.

Its members should be representatives of interested Euroregions, the border region hosting the next meeting for facilitators, some facilitators as well as representatives of the cooperation platform. The number of members may therefore vary, but should be geographically balanced and not exceed 12 to 15 people.

Main Tasks (among others):

- preparation and implementation of the annual or biennial meeting of facilitators; representatives of the cultural platform should always be invited to these meetings;
- Formation of cultural clusters in the border regions with other networks;
- Providing information to AEBR members as well as the network of facilitators about European calls for proposals, searches for project partners, and funding possibilities;
- Preparation and implementation of projects within the context of Creative Europe in order to support the task force's work and communication with facilitators as well as to facilitate their mobility ...

Meetings

A small group of interested AEBR members, representatives of the border region(s) hosting the meeting(s) for facilitators that year, and the coordinator could meet in the scope of the AEBR Executive Committee meetings.

In order to prepare the facilitator meetings and the creation of clusters in the border regions, additional meetings should be held in the regions in question. It would also be advisable to hold meetings to discuss specific common projects in the context of EU programs such as Creative Europe, Interreg B or C, Citizens for Europe, ErasmusIf possible, the cultural platform should participate in these meetings.