



**Position Paper: Opinion on "Enhancing Cohesion Policy support for regions with geographic and demographic handicaps (art 174 TFEU)"**

The **Association of European Border Regions** welcomes the initiative of the **COTER Commission** to draft a report on “Enhancing Cohesion Policy support for regions with geographic and demographic handicaps” and **intends to work closely with the rapporteur** and other stakeholders in ensuring that the **interests of border regions are taken into consideration**.

According to Communication on “Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions” published by the European Commission, border regions “cover **40% of the EU Territory [and] account for 30% of [its] population**”. However, they “generally perform less well economically than other regions within a Member State.” The Communication refers to **administrative and economic difficulties** as two of the main causes of such a phenomenon, in addition to the structural geographic and demographic handicaps which are the main subject-matter of the Opinion under consideration. More specifically, inhabitants of these regions face greater obstacles to their “**accessibility to services and facilities [and] administrative difficulties in conducting business** across the border”. According to a study carried out by the Polytechnic University of Milan, cited by the Commission, **border regions would gain 2% in GDP if only 20% of the present border-related obstacles were removed**.

**Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)** states that the Union “shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion”, with **special attention to “regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps** such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, **cross-border** and mountain regions”. The Cohesion Report covers border regions and addresses the need for further cross-border cooperation initiatives. While this represents a positive step, **more concrete and thorough positions are needed from the EU institutions**. As such, **AEBR views the debate on the present Opinion as a positive step forward** and is committed to work alongside other associations representing regions contemplated in the terms of Art. 174 of the TFEU.

Border regions have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19-related travel and movement restrictions and by their economic consequences. During the 2020-21 period, several cases of interruptions in basic services, including healthcare, were reported due to the inability of cross-border workers to go to their workplaces. Many cases were observed across Europe, **from the Spanish-Portuguese border to the German-Polish one**. These systematic border closures became known as *covidfencing*. The lack of a structured, institutionalised mechanism to address the outcomes of covidfencing led to legal and economic insecurities in these areas, further aggravating the structural handicaps faced by them. **AEBR defends that the institutionalisation and structuralization of cross-border initiatives is fundamental to address these handicaps**. Such an effort must be horizontal and carried out in constant dialogue with local and regional stakeholders.

These developments reflect a long-term trend of social and economic challenges faced by many border regions in Europe. While the root causes are manifold and complex, some common denominators exist in most of them. A main factor is the absence of a **European framework for cross-border workers**. Provisions exist at the national level, but the **lack of harmonisation and the ambiguity found in some of them lead to negative outcomes** both for the workers themselves and for local economies. **AEBR defends that such a framework should be addressed in the Cohesion Report**, and a specific initiative should be developed. This could be a **statute for EU cross-border workers**, as already proposed in the CoR's Resolution (VII/014) on *a vision for Europe. the future of Cross-border Cooperation* adopted on 1 July 2021. This approach would lead to more stability in cross-border labour markets across Europe. Moreover, in the aftermath of COVID-19, it would serve as a **strong legal guarantee for cross-border communities** affected by border closures and lockdowns decided at the national level. It would mean, in any case, a new set of opportunities for border regions.

Regarding other areas of policy such as healthcare, cross-border regions have also presented significant shortcomings in comparison to the EU average. A recent Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on "Implementation and future perspectives for Cross-border healthcare" highlighted **several challenges faced by healthcare services in border areas**. Among such challenges, **cross-border patient mobility**, the **response to the pandemic**, and **bureaucratic barriers** for cross-border medical treatment were listed. These challenges reflect those faced by cross-border healthcare professionals during the pandemic, but also before. A recent study elaborated by AEBR for DG SANTE regarding the flow of patients across some selected

borders shows the need to harmonise data and coordinate data collection in order to have a better picture about the numbers of citizens crossing borders to access essential services. Thus, AEBR calls for cross-border access to healthcare and other essential public services to be put at the forefront of Cohesion Policies.

AEBR remains committed to the defence and promotion of the interests of border regions, the fostering of cross-border cooperation and the creation of initiatives at EU level to address the social, economic, and demographic shortcomings of such regions. The EU should address the challenges faced by regions suffering from permanent natural, geographic, economic, or demographic handicaps, in line with Article 174 of the TFEU. As such, we welcome the introduction of the present Opinion and call for greater emphasis on border regions and cross-border topics through the introduction of the aforementioned recommendations therein.

#### Bibliography:

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