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Asociación de Regiones Fronterizas Europeas (ARFE)
Association des régions frontalières européennes (ARFE)
Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)
Comunità di lavoro delle regioni europee di confine (AGEG)
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Annex 3.1.b (General Assembly in Oulu)

UPDATED AEBR ACTION PLAN

This text was proposed to the Executive Committee as a first draft for debate with AEBR members in Cottbus on 10th June 2016. It was approved with the recommendation of provoking comments and proposals from AEBR members. It was finally approved without modifications during the General Assemblies in Görlitz (Euregio Neiße-Nisa-Nysa) in 2016 and in Badajoz (Euroregion EuroACE) in 2017, but it is still open for remarks, comments and other contributions. The Secretariat General submits updated versions on every General Assembly.

AEBR's core business is lobbying on cross-border issues at EU and national levels, and this is now more relevant than ever, while keeping an exchange of information with border and cross-border regions on general CBC and thematic issues; and providing services based on information, assistance and contacts.

TASK 1: COORDINATION WITH THE DEBATES ON CROSS-BORDER ISSUES

Core business at European level: interaction, exchange and coordination with EU initiatives (lobby, think-tank).

Targets:

- DG Regio
- Other Commission's departments (NEAR, SANTE, EMPL, ...)
- Parliament: REGI Committee, Informal Working Group on CBC
- European Committee of the Regions: *Cohesion Alliance* and further alliances, Intergroup on Cross-Border Cooperation, EGTC Platform, Subsidiarity Platform, Covenant of Mayors, ARLEM, etc.
- Other relevant players

Core business at the level of AEBR members: lobbying national authorities when necessary and providing services, mainly based on information, assistance and contacts.

TASK 2: THEMATIC WORK

To deal with content-related work we have an Advisory Committee, focusing general and particular cross-border issues; and several Task Forces dealing with thematic aspects. Some of them have already worked for some years: *External Borders* (TFEB) and *CB Health* since 2007, *CB Culture* (T4CBC) and *Labour Market* since 2012. *Water Management* is working quite autonomously since 2013, promoting the exchange of good practices in cross-border management of natural resources in Europe and other continents. *Data & Innovation* has been further promoted since 2015 within the partnership to develop a project on *Cross-Border Impact Assessment* (successfully submitted after two previous attempts). They are more or less active in relationship with the participation of AEBR members, external players, and the involvement in projects.

Two new TFs were launched in Cottbus in June 2016: one dealing with *Interreg*, in order to follow up the implementation of Interreg V A, identify problems and obstacles, search for possible solutions, and make proposals for future structural funding in territorial cooperation and regional funding after 2020. A second TF on *Schengen* issues, following up the effects of the refugees' crisis and national measures against terror, while keeping pressure for Schengen not to vanish. It was also launched in Cottbus in 2016, but it has drawn very little AEBR members' attention. A TF *Gender* was informally launched in Jerusalem on 8th March 2017, working under the umbrella of TFEB until it can work more autonomously.

TASK 3: BETTER APPROACH TO BORDER AND CROSS-BORDER REGIONS

3.1 Communication and information. During the process to elaborate the first draft of this Action Plan, the main gap identified was communication and information flow between AEBR and its members. We have done a lot, but have communicated very little. After several years with a lot of pressure under our tiny team regarding AEBR book-keeping, 2017 liberated some workforce to make renewed efforts to communicate better what we do (and to receive feedback from our members).

News in our *website* contain main information, links and documents related to every topic and events, and short announcements or statements are made through our *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts. Periodical *news digests* contain main news from the previous week(s) and announce coming events and initiatives of interest for our members, followers and other people interested in CBC. We keep on using *email* and news digest as communication tools with our members and friends (not everyone has a *Facebook* or *Twitter* account), but we are progressing substantially in changing the way we do it. Instead of using long mailing lists, which are less efficient to handle, blocking the server, producing errors, etc., we are now using a professional tool for the handling of mailing and news.

Additional innovation is expected using several data initiatives, synergies with projects (in particular IVY initiative and b-Solutions, which have their own communication strategies), and the use of best information available, including EU tools and project opportunities. In order to put everything available in a targeted way, a specific App and several web-based tools have been proposed. Their implementation will depend on financial achievements.

Along this process, an active feedback from members is very much encouraged, as usual.

3.2 Coordination of border and cross-border regions. Besides general communication channels from the Secretariat, dialogue facilitation should be provided in several "operational regions". These could not be organized only by a single Secretariat in a pyramidal way. It should be rationalized in geographical areas, for instance, in the framework of current macrorregional strategies (e.g. Baltic, Danube, Alpine coordination) and/or groups of similar structures such as the *German grouping in AEBR* or the *Association of Polish Euroregions*. A *Russian Association of Border Regions* and an *Assembly of Ukrainian Border Regions* have also been announced. The case of the German Grouping is ideal, because it is strongly connected with the euroregions on the one hand, and with AEBR Secretariat on the other, solving many communication problems and being a perfect framework to share information and react very fast when it is needed. But we need a committed member in every operational region to coordinate it. We should also consider other networks to play a role in this coordination picture, and make any effort to organize the whole "meta-network".

Similar synergies are to be promoted in other parts of Europe with the aim to create a consortium which could implement a great **European Borders' Project: (order changed)**

- The *German Grouping in AEBR*, coordinated by Peter Hansen, Region Sønderjylland - Schleswig (DK/DE)

- The French inter-ministerial organization MOT (*Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière*) already implements these tasks at the manifold borders of France. We are currently designing a joint AEBR-MOT approach, together with CESCO and TEIN.
- The establishment of links for an additional Balkan coordination through CESCO and AEBR Offices in Novi Sad/Belgrade. The participation of Vojvodina authorities and the Euroregion DKMT is to be strongly encouraged in this operation.
- Encourage a Greek or, at least, a *Northern Greek Coordination* with the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. CESCO-AEBR Balkans office could also play a role here, as well as some partner organizations such as the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities at the Council of Europe.
- CESCO, *Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives*, AEBR member based in Hungary. They already implement these tasks at the borders of Hungary, keep track of further border areas, and manage an Office for the Balkans in Novi Sad (Vojvodina, Serbia) where AEBR also placed an Info Centre. They also have a CESCO-Carpathian office in Kosice (SK).
- Partnership with existing *Alpine-Adriatic* and *Carpathian* coordinations.
- The *Polish Association of Euroregions* is playing this role in the borders of Poland.
- The announced *Ukrainian Assembly of Border Regions* is a promising initiative, but faces manifold challenges.
- The *Russian Association of Border Regions* is another promising initiative.
- The organization of AEBR General Assembly and Annual Conference at the Spanish-Portuguese border in 2017 made possible to call for an *Iberian Coordination* meeting. This was a chance to present AEBR to the new responsible people of those Iberian regions that left AEBR 4-5 years ago and advocate for their “homecoming”. This proposal evolved up to the first of three decentralized workshops, organized in Merida (Extremadura), Copenhagen and Bratislava by the EU Commission to present and discuss the Communication “Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions” and related instruments and actions¹.
- Other proposed groupings of interest are the *Greater Region*, the *Upper Rhine*, the Irish Cooperation (particularly shocked after the voting on the *Brexit*), and the revitalization of the *Black Sea Cooperation*. In the latter, plus the Balkan, the Russian and the Ukrainian cases, a specific cooperation with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (Council of Europe) is to be strengthened.

TASK 4: FINANCES

AEBR very basic structural budget for a year was established in 300.000 €, but revenues due to membership fees dropped below 240.000 €. This lost could hardly be balanced with revenues from projects, unless very huge ones are won.

There has always been a flow of non-paying members, but this was balanced with new membership fees and, of course, by those which regularly contribute.

The big crash occurred in 2010-2012, when suddenly four Spanish regions, two Italian, two Greek, one French, one Portuguese and one Swiss regions, eleven very active members of AEBR, decided to leave almost simultaneously. We lost their inputs, and their

¹ A fourth workshop has been organized by DG Regio to take place in Drama (East Macedonia, Greece) on 25 October 2017.

fees (55.000 € per year, 15% of our budget). Four years later we were weaker in terms of membership, and 220.000 € poorer. They were previously very active, meaning a substantial decrease in our capacity to organize activities (including Executive Committees, General Assemblies and Forums). In fact, since then we have faced twice the need to organize our General Assembly and Annual Conference without a host, but fortunately this has been compensated with a stronger commitment of some AEBR members and the support of EU institutions. In any case, this meant a “black hole” in our finances, to be added to the permanent drain of smaller cross-border structures.

Despite of the efforts made with projects, we spoiled our reserve in 2016, but we were still alive. First, we guaranteed our liquidity thanks to two Latin American projects ending in January and March 2017 and a more global one ending in October 2017:

- **INPANDES**, with the Andean Community, supported by the EU;
- **Carchi** at the border of Ecuador with Colombia; and
- a technical assistance project for the International Cooperation Agency of Extremadura (**AEXCID**) extending from November 2016 to October 2017 to explore fields of intervention in cross-border areas in Near East and America².
- Since 1st March 2017 **Interreg Volunteer Youth initiative** (IVY) has increased substantially our budget provision for 2017-2019.
- Since the end of 2017 **b-Solutions**, together with IVY, guarantee the operation of AEBR Projects’ Office in Berlin.

Therefore, despite new projects, we have to achieve an increase in our income to safeguard our basic structure and tasks. There are some members who asked for a further reduction of expenditure, but this was not possible. Which is our floor? And which our roof? To visit our members we need funds for travel costs, and we would also need some more working force, despite of many volunteer work developed by a number of members. Additional staff to assist the Secretary General, a full communication officer and additional personnel dealing with contents would be ideal.

Sources to increase income:

- Gaining new members:

- *Carinthia* joined in January 2016;
- the *Great Region* joined in 2017 as observer and is expected to progress to full membership;
- some more input on *potential Swiss members* should be made with the support of AEBR members;
- an approach to *Iberian regions* should produce the return of, at least, three of them plus *Algarve*, to AEBR;
- some Scandinavian organizations and regions are under exploration;
- some two new Russian and one Ukrainian members may join as well;
- Northern Greek regions have been approached and there is good progress;
- Two Greek Chambers of Commerce have joined in 2017 and some more are expected to do so;
- *Lombardy* and *Piedmont* could be approached through the CoR;

² ...those damned Latin American projects! However, thanks to them we could complete our balances in the period 2010-2017. AEXCID II is a new project that facilitates the follow up of these interventions.

- we still wait for *Valle d’Aosta*;
- *Friuli-Venezia-Giulia* should be re-approached by our politicians;
- the *County of Kent* (UK) would be an ideal partner for AEBR;
- the same with *Scotland*;
- a specific approach should be made to EGTCs;
- and also to small European states such as *Andorra* or *Liechtenstein*.

New difficulties arising in border areas make our work more visible. New projects in the EU too. Then, it should be easier to gain new members.

- An **increase of the fee for regional governments** with budget possibilities up to an amount of € 7,500 (Gelderland’s proposal) did not raised a great enthusiasm among the Executive Committee members in Constance in February 2016. However, this led to the decision to fix this fee in € 6,000. This was approved at the General Assembly 2016 in Görlitz, and the paying behaviour seems quite regular in 2017-2018.
- An **increase of the fees for euroregions of 10%** (5% in 2017 and 5% in 2018), following Mr Junk’s proposal approved at the General Assembly 2016 in Görlitz).

- **Direct EU financing / EU projects:** it is very hard, and there is too much competition. We compete with highly skilled (and wealthy) consultants. But we have kept on searching for projects which match two main objectives: deliver a service to our members and get some resources for our structure through the promotion of a big **European Borders’ Project** (coaching or escorting border regions). IVY and b-Solutions are good signs in that direction, as both are very much focussed on concrete services to border regions.
- **Sponsorship:** Mr Moisió proposed a system to gain sponsors announcing their events or products in our website and other communication tools. Promising, though the involvement with private partners is always controversial. Same for projects with organizations such as the *Coca Cola Foundation*, though this looks quite “harmless”.
- **Crowdfunding:** this is only possible for concrete initiatives, and very difficult and restricted in Europe. We planned a campaign in this regard to promote our old project outline on “CB TV Series”, but this was quite complicated in most of Europe, due to high restrictions for receivers and contributors. In search for financing an “information helpdesk for refugees”, in which we were involved for almost three years, we supported its operation through a crowdfunding platform in the US, managed by an AEBR partner. We handled this as a test for possible future initiatives, but the promotion of European initiatives in the US does not seem to be so promising. This was implemented under President Barak Obama’s Administration, and now the situation looks much more difficult, but there are some institutions from the US, Mexico and Canada which have asked for AEBR collaboration.
- **Other projects:** we are still approached by institutions, which want to use the knowledge gained by AEBR after decades of observation and promotion of CBC in Europe, as well as its network:
 - Some of these are shaped in projects that are very much time –and effort– demanding for AEBR, though revenues are meagre, and they should be avoided.
 - Meanwhile, other projects are only good sources to make us more visible, by using the information we already have. Soft participation in these projects

renders very interesting benefits for our Association in terms of visibility and some income for networking.

- The same happens with those projects where our only role is the dissemination of information and the exploitation of the results, though we may improve these tasks.
 - Other projects demand technical expertise, which is provided through the Secretariat General, the *Beirat*, and a network of experts working in other projects, which devote time mostly in a voluntary basis.
- **Paying for services, conferences, seminars?** It is widely assumed that everything we do is free of charge, but some of our members have found their ways to pay for some of our services and contribute to our general costs (these could be minor contributions compensating, at least, travel and accommodation costs, but they are extremely helpful). This has been the case in the last three years for Hedmark County Council (NO) and, in several occasions, by Extremadura (ES). ICBACN (IE-UK) has also developed an initiative "Brexit at the Border" with AEBR participation.

The role of a *European Cross-Border Academy*, in the form of a trust foundation according to German Law has been analysed, building on capacity building efforts, such as an *Online CBC Platform*, the *CB School* and the *CBC Curriculum project*.

This Action Plan and AEBR Strategy is and will be reviewed according to the monitoring of the IVY initiative (and other major projects such as b-Solutions), so that main findings can be taken into account. The recommendations of the Inpandes project, capacity building ones and technical assistance for Extremadura, as well as the progress in *AEBR Global Initiative*, should also be carefully taken into account in further reviews of our strategy and action plan.

(updated on 23 July 2018)