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 Association des régions frontalières européennes (ARFE)
 Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)
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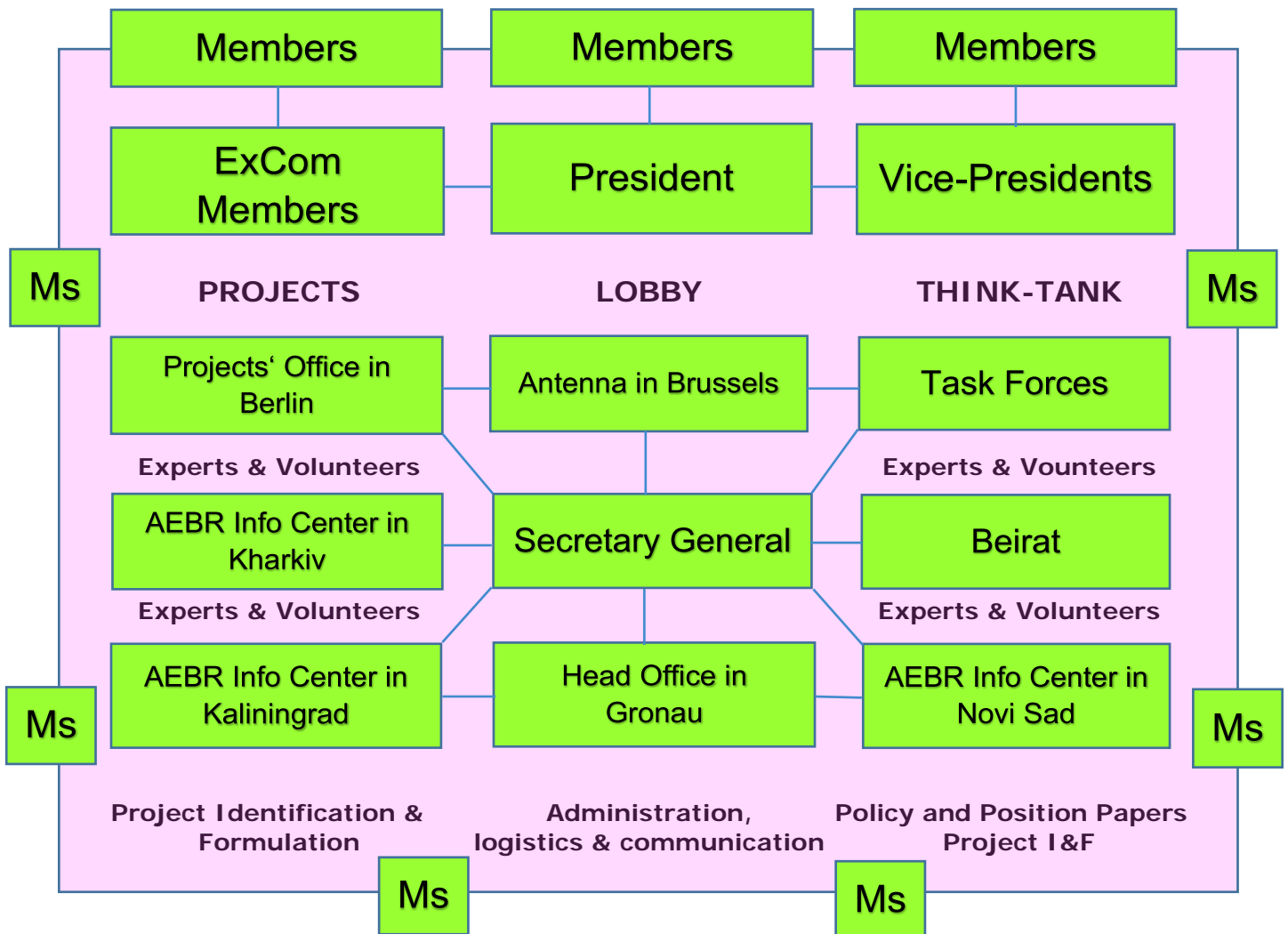
Annex 4.1

REVIEWED AEBR STRATEGY

Overview of current organization of the AEBR

(This table was included in Annex 5e, Cottbus ExCom)

Political work: decision-making levels (EU, national, regional)



Task Forces: TFEB, T4CBC, CB Health, CB Labour Market, CB Water Management, CB Data&Innovation, Interreg, Schengen

Source: AEBR Executive Committee meeting, Cottbus, 10th June 2016, Annex 5e

(proposed for the future) ↓

AEBR Foundation: European Cross-Border Academy (ECBA)
 Projects, Research, Quality Management
 Youth Forum – Peer Group

(This Strategy was approved by the AEBR Executive Committee meeting and ratified by the General Assembly on 13th November 2015 at the Committee of the Regions, Brussels)

A debate to review the AEBR Strategy was proposed to be carried out amongst AEBR members between the General Assembly 2015 in Brussels and the General Assembly 2016 in the Euroregion Nisa (CZ/DE/PL). The departing point was the definition in 2014 and 2015 of a future vision for the Association based on:

- concrete and targeted services for members, stressing regular information on most important developments in fields of their interest, consultations, calls for projects, etc., dealing especially with the partners' demands;
- reacting systematically to any initiative affecting CBC or EU border territories at EU, national or regional level;
- lobbying for the interest of border and cross-border regions;
- organizing events with relevant experts, authorities, and interested parties on CBC;
- preparing, implementing and evaluating project proposals.

There is a general consensus that **AEBR Core Business** consists of: a) identification of CB obstacles and possible solutions; b) lobbying EU institutions and national authorities about CB issues, including solutions to identified obstacles; and c) informing border and cross-border regions.

Regarding **provision of services**, AEBR Core Business is the main one, though it is an indirect service, sometimes with a mid- or long-term view. For instance, in the summer of 2016 we are already following up the process to launch a Mid-Term Review of the Financial Perspectives of the EU 2014-2020, and the 7th Cohesion Report, expected for the second half of 2017, in order not to lose track for cross-border interests. Already in 2015, the AEBR initiated an in-depth analysis on how territorial cooperation programmes should look like after 2020.

Information is another challenge. There are many tools and possibilities at EU, national and regional level, but the information does not flow properly despite of the availability of sources. Perhaps there is too much information, and its rationalisation is needed. To this end, an App has been conceived in order to offer border and cross-border regions tailor-made information about EU topics, project calls, events, good practices, etc. This App has not been developed due to its cost (but possibilities to finance it are being explored).

It is also very much needed to extend the knowledge and utilisation of EU tools, such as the online webportal *Your Europe* (www.youreurope.eu) on EU Rights, including the *Your Europe Advice* service (www.youreuropeadvice.eu) to answer enquiries from citizens (and businesses) on their personal EU rights in all 24 EU languages. This tool is free of charge and guarantees a reply from a specialised lawyer within one week. SOLVIT (www.solvit.eu) helps citizens and businesses to solve problems with a foreign national administration. We could build up cross-border cases in collaboration with these tools and make early advice to cross-border regions when implementing new activities. The extension of similar services at the external borders of the EU would also be advisable, within the limits of what it is possible.

We use direct mailing about main news, our website, and we try a most dynamic newflash under the formula of a *News Digest*, which still needs to achieve a regular periodicity. We are also increasingly using the social platforms:

- [Facebook](#) is mostly used in a personal basis, but the Task Force External Borders has established a closed discussion forum with regular contributions and a growing community. Another initiative in Facebook is the *Informational Center of AEBR at Simon Kuznets KhNEU*, and similar initiatives are to be encouraged for other task forces or working groups.
- In [Twitter](#) (@SocialnetAEBR) we inform of main events that we organize or attend, and re-tweet as much as possible our members' events and news. We cannot keep a permanent presence, because this needs time, but it would be recommended to have a more systematic approach to this kind of networks. An informal "think-tank" is under preparation in Berlin with the participation of an expert in Internet positioning to know more about this. Participation in active events with popular hashtags helps, as well as connecting AEBR members.
- *Messenger* and *WhatsApp* is also growingly used by some groups of AEBR members or in certain events.
- AEBR videos in *YouTube* have many visits, but they are still underused by most of our members. We are organizing all videos in one single location under "AEBR1971". To watch most recent videos, you can find them in the following playing list: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9vyBYGfiELuhCmbaBxdcRYgChYaLWUMC>
Older videos can be found in: <https://www.youtube.com/user/AEBR1971/videos>.

There is a growing use of these tools by members and friends. However, the huge amount of information available and quick successions of events makes very difficult to keep a dynamic flow of information without the participation of a full-time employee (and/or an App to manage available information). To this end, in some of the projects where the AEBR has been invited to take part, the role of the Association is proposed "dissemination and exploitation of results". The idea is contracting a "dissemination officer" part-time per each project for dissemination activities (of the project in particular and the AEBR in general). Unfortunately only projects with a minor budget have been approved by now, and the "big ones" are yet to come.

We also take part in several expert groups organized by EU institutions and other organizations, think tanks and thematic platforms in social media (*EGTC - European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, Cross Border Cooperation Network - Expert Group, Euroregion Slobozhanshchyna, Rede de Educação e Integração Fronteira, Fronteras Latinoamericanas, Fronteras Cooperativas – Ciudades Gemelas Cooperativas*). Many of these groups discuss on general and particular topics of interest for cross-border regions, and they may be a good source to exchange points of view, explore new project ideas, find partners, etc.

The network organized around the AEBR, and the information it contains, can be developed through the implementation of joint projects. But most actions in this direction should follow strict regulations through project calls. It is important to stress here that those border and cross-border regions wishing to take part in European projects under general calls, should join the appropriate register(s) to be eligible to apply. Other recommended register is the Transparency Register of the EU. In order to better respond to project calls, the task forces are mainly oriented in this direction:

- *Task Force External Borders* already tried a project application for Interreg Europe: the FIRE project, but the competition is very huge; and explores other possibilities within ENI & IPA, as well as outside the EU: United Nations, private foundations, etc. The Info Centres in Kharkiv and Novi Sad are also exploring a variety of project possibilities, particularly within Erasmus+ and other calls.

- *Task Force **Water Management*** has designed several project proposals in Europe and in other continents, while following up main related EU calls.
- *Task Force **CB Culture*** also explores several fields, particularly Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, while consolidating a strong network of cultural platforms and creators.
- *Task Force **CB Health*** is reviving the Triple ICE project for Interreg Europe, in cooperation with the patients' organization EPECS; and should explore further possibilities, including an offer by ECORYS (NL) to take part in a Study for DG Sanco (EU Commission) on *Capitalising on Existing Initiatives for Cooperation in Healthcare in Border Regions*.
- A *Task Force **Labour Market*** was constituted to follow up the work initiated some years ago in this field and explore new possibilities for many border regions, especially when dealing with youth unemployment. It follows the project ComUnYouth, developed by several AEBR members and other partners in the Baltic Region with the support of the Nordic Council of Ministers, and aims at developing project concepts in other cross-border regions, particularly in Southern and South-East Europe.
- A new working group is also being developed to work on ***Data&Innovation***. It began to be created during a workshop in Lisbon around the Territorial Impact Assessment Toolkit developed by Prof. Eduardo Medeiros and presented in an Seminar organized at the University of Lisbon on 10th April 2015, under the support of Hedmark County Council; as well as other members' and partners' initiatives, looking at the strong need of data, indicators, results and impact assessment.
- A *Task Force **Interreg*** has begun to work in June 2016. It has initiated its activities with a practical case posed by a group of Euroregions in Central Europe related to the management of funds addressed to people-to-people (P2P) projects. Several lobby actions have been implemented, as well as a survey on the management of these funds.
- A *Task Force on **Schengen*** related issues has been launched in June 2016 and it is expected to receive some concrete tasks during the AEBR Annual Conference 2016.

Many of these actions are possible thanks to the work developed by our members within these groups, but other services should also be provided from inside the AEBR structure. The internal structure is very weak by now, but we have to get used to this situation. While our finances depend growingly from projects and decreasingly from fees, we have to adapt our structure to the flow of funds from projects. This is not very comfortable, but it is the only possible scenario with the current level of income. An increase in membership (in the particular amounts and/or the number of paying members) would solve this in a most appropriate way, and the additional structure needed for projects could be better designed and implemented.

Regarding our ***reactions to any initiative affecting CBC or border territories*** at EU, national or regional level, we have tried to keep our regular activity despite of already mentioned financial and structural constraints. Our regular relationship with European institutions and our contacts' network keep us well aware of any important initiative affecting our interests, giving us the opportunity to react in early discussion stages. AEBR's or its members' contacts at national and regional level also keep us updated of any progress or damage in the participation of border and border regions in decision-making processes, definition or implementation of programmes, and in any other relevant issue affecting border territories and cross-border structures.

The same can be said about our ***lobbying for the interest of border and cross-border regions***. With healthier finances and a larger structure, this lobbying could be more

systematic and productive. In any case, many efforts are made by the President, the Secretariat, the Advisory Committee and many of our members, either individually or through the task forces, to keep a high level of communication with EU institutions. There are many results achieved in terms of the influence of border and cross-border regions in legislative proposals, financial chapters, policies, initiatives and programmes, institutional reports, etc. In fact, in the last years cross-border cooperation has entered more and more deeply in EU and national agendas.

Of course, this is not only the result of AEBR's work, at least it is not only the result of our work developed in the last ten years. Actually, it is the result of forty-five years working together, border by border all over Europe, overcoming many difficulties and obstacles. In these years other associations of regions have been created, generalists and thematic, including several platforms to promote cross-border cooperation. This has undoubtedly provoked a strengthening of the role of local and regional authorities in all levels, including the EU, showing today a tight network covering all fields of activity. And this is growingly the case of border and cross-border regions, despite of a (sometimes) smooth re-nationalisation of policies and the subsequent erosion of the European integration process. In this situation of instability and uncertainty, a necessary synergy amongst all elements of this regional network has been pursued, but there are many situations of **competition** due to overlapping functions and spheres of influence. This competition makes the access to grants very difficult, especially when competitors have wider structures and stronger finances.

On the other hand, many cross-border structures have been built in these years, euroregions, similar structures and, more recently, many EGTCs. Some of the many structures created in the nineties do not exist today, but many have grown, and their territories have grown with them. Others wait with minimum structures to have the chance to participate more actively in the whole cycle of CBC, including decision-making. There are plenty of successful stories in European borders which have not been told, or they have not been told properly. Probably the lack of a widely accepted European narrative on borders and CBC has also something to do with the lack of knowledge about those little stories happening every day in every border.

And this is another working field we are developing toward European institutions: **border regions show a "positive European agenda"**, as well as an "agenda of challenges" for the next decades. EU institutions should pay a closer look to these issues, and the AEBR **task forces** also focus on major topics for the EU which affect cross-border territories:

- *CB Culture (T4CBC)* plays a crucial role in the development of trust, first brick in the wall of cross-border integration;
- *CB Labour Market* shows the work yet to be done in harmonising national regulations and in achieving an authentic Single Market for daily issues;
- *CB Health* focuses on patients' rights and efficient health care and social services across borders;
- *CB Water Management* deals with another major European and global issue, the management of natural resources across national boundaries, while establishes bridges with other continents under the AEBR Global Initiative; and
- *External Borders (TFEB)* follows the relationship with our neighbours and promotes exchanges of views across the external borders of the EU, particularly between public authorities, civil society organisations and, especially, amongst youth.
- *TF Interreg* provides an insight on practical issues faced daily by cross-border regions when implementing cross-border projects and programmes.
- *TF Schengen* will analyse how to stimulate the feeling of cross-border citizenship.

We have a stake as European border and cross-border regions in strengthening the European ideal, particularly in these difficult times, as CBC is considered the *Cement of the European House*. It is therefore very important to **guarantee the sustainability of cross-border structures and organizations**, and strengthen their role in demanding the closing of cross-border infrastructural gaps (including local needs, and also for tourism), the identification of obstacles (and possible solutions) for the development of dynamic cross-border labour markets, the mutual acknowledge of qualifications, cross-border health and social services, taxation, pensions, etc.; and the implementation of new working fields in the cross-border promotion of ecological agribusinesses, renewable energies, ICTs, or e-commerce.

This is another challenge for our Association, because we very often lobby for all border and cross-border regions in Europe, proposing general provisions in various regulatory frameworks, reports, analyses and perspectives. Therefore there are many regions and structures which benefit from our job without any contribution to the network, while we face serious difficulties due to the lack of resources. It is important to increase these colleagues' awareness about the benefits of joining the Association and the need to have a stronger group of members to back our activities, for many reasons. We should be aware of the fact that there are interested parties spreading the word on "the end of the Cohesion Policy", including Territorial Cohesion and CBC. This happens every EU funding period and we should react well on time. Meanwhile, others concentrate on "how difficult AEBR's financial situation is", trying to undermine our prestige and capacities. Fortunately, we have been able to keep on working, lobbying, assisting regions, preparing project proposals, etc., and we can go on provided that we have a minimum guaranteed income. Then we could also increase our visibility through the systematic communication of our work.

Regarding the exchange of views and the debate on main issues of interest, one of the fields where we have increased our activity in the last years is the **organization of events with relevant experts, authorities and interested parties** on CBC. In average, we are organizing or co-organizing between 5-10 events per year, and the number grows steadily.

In the meantime, we have to find the time, personnel and other resources to **prepare, submit, implement and evaluate project concepts**. In this sense we rely very much on volunteer work from some of our experts (within and outside our members) who devote their time to help us working out projects at different levels. We also use the knowledge developed by our members and other European border and cross-border regions, and we are receiving a growing number of direct contracts in the last years, particularly supporting **cross-border cooperation outside Europe**. These projects take some of our time, but they also refresh our management capacities in times of decreasing income through fees. We are working hard to improve this situation by trying more projects in Europe, but the competition is very high and demanding in our continent, while in other parts of the world we are the leading organization, as local stakeholders need a wide overview about cross-border cooperation over time in very diverse territories and circumstances.

How to solve these dilemmas? On the one hand we have a highly demanding field of extension of CBC to other continents, with a lot of opportunities of grants and contracts. On the other hand, the need to face growing demands by our European members with very little resources. During the last four years, most of the work on Latin American projects has been mostly done in a volunteer basis by our network of experts, plus additional working time by the Secretary General and other members of our staff. Very few contracts for experts have been made, meaning in general short compensations for a wider volunteer work made by every expert.

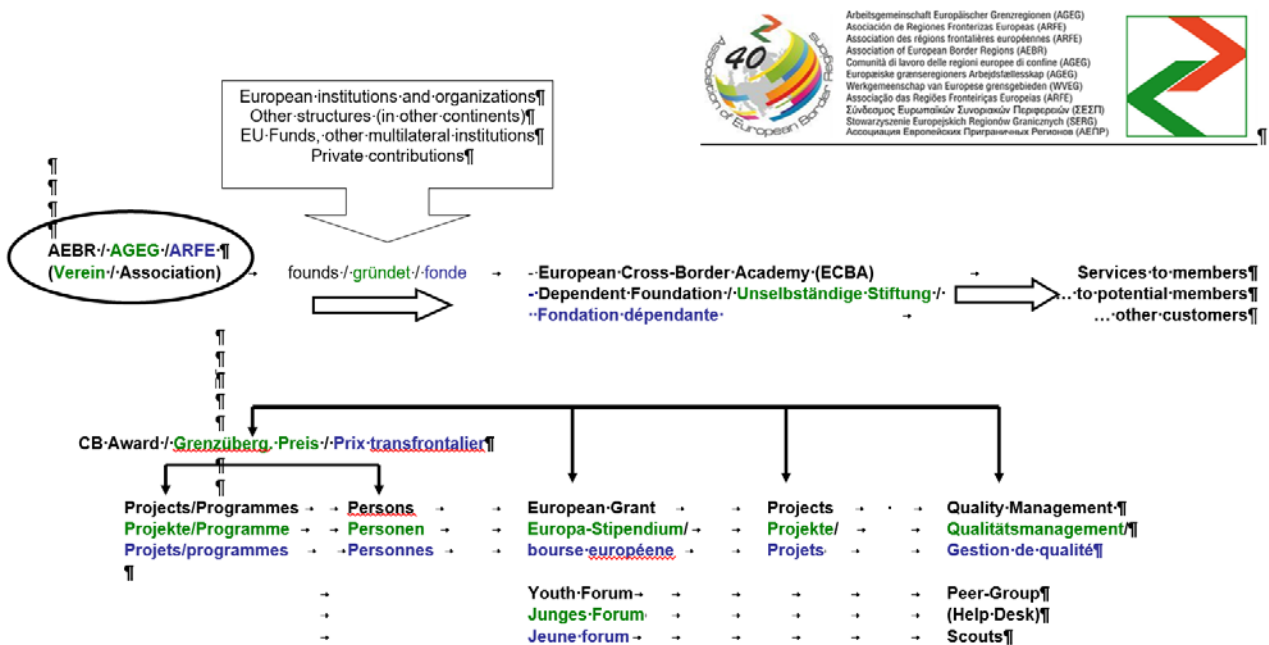
Now we are facing additional contracts and projects building upon our previous work, relying their implementation in the network of experts around these projects, and **keeping**

for the AEBR just a coordination role. This role can be accompanied by dissemination and exploitation tasks, if additional staff is contracted to do this job. The AEBR still needs to keep its control on the identification and design phases of these projects, otherwise there is a risk of losing the logic behind them and damaging their sustainability. It is expected a development of these initiatives in Mercosur, the Andean Community and Central America in the next 5-10 years. The same can be said about Africa, in particular West Africa. And there is a growing (and highly challenging) field in the Mediterranean. For this and other reasons, refugees and migrants are also drawing our attention, and several proposals have already been defined.

At the same time, as previously explained, several groups within the AEBR are exploring projects within Europe, mostly through Interreg. “There is life outside Interreg!”, we said in one of our Annual Conferences some years ago. Horizon 2020, Erasmus+, other structural funding or territorial tools (ESF, rural development, Integrated Territorial Investment, Community-led Local Development,), international, national and regional funds, private investment, charities, crowdfunding, etc. There are many possibilities which can be explored, and we have project concepts for many of them. In some cases, the union of forces between distant border regions could also be promoted, as it is the case with interregional projects, and even across continents. There are several European Commission’s initiatives that could lead to the establishment of twinning borders. Unfortunately, most of this idea has been concentrated solely in “Twinning Cities”, but we are stressing a wider perspective when proposing twinning in border areas.

Nevertheless, we should concentrate on our “core business”, which is also in the heart of the European project. We have to keep on exploring (and defending) the Single Market, stressing border regions’ priorities in CBC and national mainstream programmes, highlighting the role of CBC structures in issues like cross-border provision of services and advice, the activation of cross-border economies, the joint/common use and management of shares resources, and the permanent observation of cross-border performance.

Another issue that has been stressed in the last years is the extension of our activities into the field of systematic capacity building. To this end the following diagram has been proposed for discussion in order to create a European Cross-Border Academy.



Source: AEBR Executive Committee meeting, Budapest, 27th February 2015, Annex 8