

Cross-Border Labour Mobility and Markets: Issues and Insights from B-solutions

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Introduction

Even though the European Union (EU) has for long been investing on (particularly via the Interreg programme) and implemented efforts to facilitate the “birthing” of cross-border labour markets (see e.g., European Commission, 2017), there are still a multitude of obstacles that hinder such integration development in cross-border regions. Thus, cross-border labour mobility within the EU has remained as a rather marginal phenomenon (Bouwens, 2004; Buch et al. 2009; Böhm & Opiota, 2019; Edzes et al. 2022). In fact, according to the European Employment Services (2024), in 2022, about 1.8 million EU citizens lived in one country but worked in a neighbouring one. The figure is less than one percent of the total working age population of the EU. This mismatch –i.e., the persistence of border effects in Europe despite the efforts to facilitate cross-border cooperation (Capello et al. 2018) – has acted as the backdrop for the *b-solutions* project. Funded by the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) and led by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) *b-solutions* has gathered data and knowledge on

cross-border cooperation and the legal and administrative obstacles that still pose limits to interaction between neighbouring border regions within Europe. The *b-solutions* project also proposes solutions to improve cross-border cooperation. As such, *b-solutions* is making a significant contribution to the development of EU border regions by facilitating social and economic cross-border activity.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a review, interpretation and critical synthesis of the results of *b-solutions* in the area of cross-border labour mobility and market, which are discussed in the project under the theme(s) of “employment” or “employment and education”. The underlying target of the theme(s) is to facilitate cross-border labour mobility and the integration of cross-border labour markets. The overarching aim of this paper is to suggest ways to improve the impact of the results of *b-solutions* to facilitate the project to achieve this target.

This paper is not the first one to review *b-solutions*. Previous investigations into the results of the project (Chirodea et al. 2024; Medeiros et al. 2022, 2023, 2024) have largely

concluded in favourable assessments¹. As a point of departure, the paper at hand will approach *b-solutions* from a social science perspective by generally problematizing (any) efforts aimed at achieving high levels of cross-border labour mobility and more integrated cross-border labour markets. It does so by diving first into the previous literature on the topic that has largely underlined the difficulty of facilitating cross-border labour mobility and establishing integrated cross-border labour markets. As such, the *b-solutions* is “tasked” with an important but at the same time extremely challenging target. Second, the reviewed literature will provide an outline for an analytical framework against which the results of *b-solutions* are assessed. This empirical exercise will provide the basis for a dialogue between issues underlined in the theory and previous studies and the practical “ground-level” work carried out by *b-solutions*. The main argument is that a solid theoretical understanding of the issues facing cross-border labour mobility and cross-border labour market integration can help practical project-related work in achieving increased impact. As such, the dialogue underscores points of departure to be considered in (or incorporated into) the planning of future phases of *b-solutions*. That is, it paves the way for recommendations to potentially further improve the likelihood of the project

to meet the (underlying) target of facilitating cross-border labour mobility and creating more integrated cross-border labour markets within the EU.

Literature review: State-of-the-art in cross-border labour mobility and markets

For the purposes of the literature review, a title, keyword and abstract search was conducted in Elsevier’s Scopus database² to identify previous literature on cross-border labour mobility and markets. Since this paper is not a systematic literature review, purposeful sampling was conducted to include (only) the most relevant research discussing the topic within the context of the EU. The procedure resulted in a master list of articles and book chapters that are discussed below together with some additional supporting literature (even though their main focus might not necessarily be on cross-border labour mobility nor markets) that are used to underline the points made. The review is arranged around five interlinked themes identified from the literature that will be contrasted to the results of *b-solutions* in the next sections.

Push and pull: As discussed by Klatt (2014), the classical “push” and “pull” model (of migration) introduced by Lee (1966) still has relevance today in

1 The main cause of concern seems to be the uneven geographical distribution of the cases addressed by *b-solutions* meaning that the benefits of the project results have been directed to only a few European cross-border regions.

2 See: <https://www.scopus.com/>

explaining cross-border labour markets as the model categorises the factors promoting and preventing cross-border labour mobility (Pires & Nunes, 2018). In essence, the push factors create a wish to venture outside one's home area (such as unemployment or low salaries), whereas the pull factors include those forces that attract people to a certain location (such as working opportunities or higher salaries). Another way of discussing the rationale behind cross-border mobility is to differentiate between "keep" and "repel" factors (Spierings & van der Velde, 2013). That is, if the home labour market is considered as more appealing (keep) and the labour market on the other side of the border as less appealing (repel). The issue here is whether removing legislative and administrative obstacles can affect both the push and pull factors needed to induce cross-border labour mobility.

Immobility: It is important to acknowledge that decisions concerning cross-border mobility are done at the individual/household level (Gottholmseder & Theurl, 2007). It is also important to keep in mind that cross-border mobility decisions are influenced by both rational factors based on "pure" economic reasons (Wiesböck et al. 2018), such as unemployment on the one side versus working opportunities on the other side of the border, but also by emotional factors. Such emotional factors include, for example, a willingness to seize adventurous opportunities that can be counterbalanced by a tendency to avoid unfamiliar things and uncertain

outcomes (Klatt, 2014; Spierings & van der Velde, 2008; van der Velde & Naerssen, 2011). According to the meagre levels of cross-border labour mobility across the border regions of the EU, it seems that uncertainty avoidance prevails over adventurousness. In fact, according to van Houtum and van der Velde (2004) cross-border labour mobility within the EU is better described as cross-border labour market "immobility": most workers do not even consider seeking work across the border due to nationally and socially constructed attitudes. This is because people are not commonly very willing to accept the high level of unfamiliarity related to seeking job opportunities across the border and thus decide to stay in their home country (i.e., the perceived "comfort zone") where everything is familiar (Pires & Nunes, 2018). Thus, while removing legislative and administrative obstacles may be important in other ways, the question remains whether they are sufficient to change the negative attitude of workers on cross-border mobility, which seems to be the most significant bottleneck hindering the emergence of well-integrated cross-border labour markets within the EU (van Houtum & van der Velde, 2004). In line, Buch et al. (2009) have stated that a high level of cross-border labour market integration will not be achieved by simply removing administrative and legal obstacles alone without tackling cultural differences and mental barriers. It is also important to remember that a stated willingness to do something

does not equal to actually implementing such plans (Huber & Nowotny, 2013). Consequently, De Gijsel and Janssen (2000) have claimed that even if all (legal and administrative) obstacles for cross-border mobility were removed, willingness to commute or move across the border would not equal actual cross-border labour mobility due to social and cultural obstacles. Therefore, the *“hopes pinned on cross-border mobility in order to reduce unemployment may be unjustified even if jobs were available across the border”* (De Gijsel & Janssen, 2000, p. 75).

Institutions: As already discussed above, in addition to legal and administrative obstacles, there are several other important (“softer”) facets of cross-border cooperation that can either hinder or pave the way for more integrated cross-border labour markets. These include, for example, cultural, social and cognitive “proximity” that manifest in the form of similarities/differences in languages, business cultures, norms, values, etc. (Bartz & Fuchs-Schündeln, 2012; De Gijsel & Janssen, 2000; Makkonen & Williams, 2018; Makkonen et al. 2017; Parenti & Tealdi, 2021). Similarities across the border in these informal institutions (or dimensions) of cross-border cooperation can shape the formal institutions (laws and regulations) by promoting the emergence of a common cross-border regional identity and by facilitating dialogue between and consensus building in cross-border policy networks (Lundquist & Trippl,

2013; Makkonen & Rohde, 2016; Trippl, 2010). Further, laws and regulations governing cross-border labour mobility are determined at multiple levels. At the international level, the EU is working at creating better integrated cross-border labour markets. Still, as noted by Shire et al. (2018), national-level regulations remain (at least equally if not even more) essential in determining how labour crosses borders. Considering that *“cross-border policy network organisations have limited power to change or facilitate the adaptation of formal institutions directly”* (Miörner et al. 2018, p. 201), this might be particularly problematic in cases where these other actors (e.g., regional policymakers, national governments, the EU, etc.) needed to implement changes to formal institutions lack the kinds of informal institutional similarities discussed above that would facilitate dialogue and consensus building between them. Thus, the proposals on removing legislative and administrative obstacles stemming from border regions are very unlikely to be implemented without a wider consensus on the need for change.

Border functions: Borders are more than just barriers. In fact, they have different functions that can both “shield” or “sieve” –that is, hinder but also facilitate– cross-border interaction (Cappellano et al. 2022; Richardson & Cappellano, 2022; Sohn, 2014; Sohn & Licheron, 2018). For example, cross-border economic differentials might deter “high-road” cross-border cooperation (Trippl, 2010), such as co-

patenting and co-innovation, but at the same time can be expected to display a positive effect on cross-border flows of labour. Indeed, according to Bouwens (2004) cross-border commuting is commonly significant only in the face of substantial economic differences across the border and, thus, is often predominantly unidirectional (Möller et al. 2018). That is, cross-border labour mobility flows are preponderantly directed towards the economically more developed (appealing) side of the border. For example, Broersma et al. (2022), Buch et al. (2009), Chilla and Heugel (2022), Knotter (2014) and Pires and Nunes (2018) have reported empirical findings that support a similar interpretation: particularly, wage and unemployment differentials have been shown to drive work-related cross-border commuting. As such, the aim of the EU to facilitate economic convergence and cohesion between European countries and regions may diminish such differences and, thus, actually work against motivating cross-border labour mobility (Bouwens, 2004) that is simultaneously encouraged via the removal of legal and administrative obstacles.

By-passers: While border regions naturally “come in all shapes and sizes” (Anderson & O’Dowd, 1999, p. 596), many of them are national peripheries (European Commission, 2017a; van Gorp, 2009). Thus, not all cross-border regions really have a demand for integrated labour markets due to the absence of major economic

“engines” on either side of the border (Böhm & Opiola, 2019). Such cross-border contexts do not favour cross-border commuting. Thus, cross-border labour flows largely by-pass the border region and rather manifests in terms of mobility to farther away metropolitan areas (Williams et al., 2001). Similar trends have been shown to apply also, for example, in the case of cross-border scientific (Makkonen, 2015) and inter-firm cooperation (Krätke & Borst, 2007). In fact, it has been argued that border regions are often essentially mere transit zones between the larger economies located beyond them (Laine, 2007; Thomas, 2006; Timothy et al. 2016). Thus, the removal of legal and administrative obstacles might actually be more beneficial to other more faraway but economically more developed regions than the border regions.

A review and interpretation: The results of *b-solutions*

Document data

The *b-solutions* project concentrates on finding ways to remove (or at least alleviate) legal and administrative obstacles hampering cross-border interaction within the EU. It does so by matching external experts and border regions together. That is, at the core of *b-solution* are the involved external experts who have been tasked to finding solutions to (a) particular legal and/or administrative problem(s), that

has/have been identified as hampering cross-border interaction by (an) organisation(s) located in (a) specific border region(s). The main results of *b-solutions* are collected in:

1. Three compendiums (and one annex) showcasing obstacles and relative solutions of 131 cases identified between 2018 and 2023
2. Three thematic booklets containing analyses of common obstacles and solutions regarding: Cross-border public services, Education and employment and the European Green Deal
3. Two illustrated storytelling booklets showcasing 16 stories of border obstacles and their impact on citizens in border regions.

The publications include a full description of the process and methodology of *b-solutions* and are available for download from the project's home pages¹.

This review will concentrate on those results that are linked to cross-border labour mobility and markets discussed in the documents under the theme(s) of “employment” or “employment and education”: all in all, 44 pilot actions, advice cases or stories (hereafter, collectively referred to as cases) were reviewed that clearly fit to the topic at hand. *Pilot actions* are specific solutions addressing concrete legal and administrative obstacles that are based

on a case study. Pilot actions were only implemented in the first wave of proposals to *b-solutions*. Due to the lack of proposals and solid legal descriptions of the obstacles it became obvious that the border regions needed additional support to make a legal assessment of the causes of the obstacles. Therefore, *b-solutions* changed its focus from pilot actions to advice cases. These *advice cases* refer to external expert consultations concerning the exact legal and administrative nature of the obstacles identified in border regions. Finally, *stories* are illustrative descriptions of the challenges faced by individuals living in cross-border regions (based on selected advice cases).

Analytical framework

The review was conducted as an iterative process between reading the documents and the state-of-the-art in cross-border labour mobility and markets literature. In addition to a generalisation of the types of obstacles and proposed solutions, this process led to a series of objective categorisations that form the analytical framework (consisting of the five interlinked themes discussed above in the literature review section) for assessing the cases. That is, the framework helps to generalise the main messages learned from the cases vis-à-vis the previous literature by highlighting the following relevant aspects:

1. Push and pull: whether the solutions focus only on pull factors or whether push factors are also considered?

¹ Available from: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>

- helps to pinpoint the shortcomings of *b-solutions vis-à-vis* the previous literature on cross-border labour mobility and markets as will be shown below.

The stated obstacles and proposed solutions have a clear pattern of being centred around differences in laws and regulations across the border that are to be overcome by amendments to existing or via the establishment of new legal and regulatory frameworks. The word cloud “analysis”¹ in Figure 1 showcases that *b-solutions* is focusing on obstacles that concern cross-border differences in issues relating to social security and social benefits. That is, the differing (or the lack of knowledge on existing) legal frameworks and regulations governing the social security systems in the two (or more) countries in question. The most common solution to such cross-border obstacles seems to be bilateral/joint agreements. Other commonly raised solutions include cooperation, training and information sharing (e.g., by creating “one-stop shop” information and service points).

Figure 1. Word clouds describing the obstacles (left) and solutions (right).



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Note: Since “cross-border” and “border” are the most obvious words to appear in all the cases analysed, they were excluded from the figure along with other commonly used words (such as: “and”; “the”; “therefore”; etc.) with limited information value for the purposes of this paper.

The results of the categorisation exercise can be summarised as follows:

1. In essence, the results of *b-solutions* aim at easing the legal and administrative burden of crossing the border for employment (and education) and, thus, making cross-border labour mobility more appealing. According to this reading, the cases are focusing on pull (or repel) factors that affect the attractiveness of cross-border labour mobility. While this is reasonable given the goals of the project it nonetheless disregards push factors that would explain why workers are willing to cross the border in the first place.
2. Similarly, softer cultural, social and mental barriers are rarely discussed¹, except for a few cases (five out of the 44 cases analysed) mentioning language differences as a hindering factor to cross-border labour mobility and markets. Again, this is natural since *b-solutions* target legal and administrative obstacles. However, at the same time this means that the root

causes of cross-border immobility are left unaddressed by the project. There are, however, a couple of encouraging exceptions. For instance, the *Develop a successful business with my neighbour country* -case lists the “lack of familiarity with the business culture” as an obstacle hindering cross-border interaction (the solution being: facilitating more awareness and understanding). Another example comes from the *Going beyond obstacles in yachting internship and training* -case that mentions dual diplomas as a way to promote the learning of “the language and culture of the neighbouring country”. These notions include the idea of (overcoming) unfamiliarity discussed in the literature on cross-border labour immobility.

3. As a very positive note, in 13 out of the 44 cases analysed², there is a clear indication that other (regional and/or national) organisations are willing to implement the solutions suggested in the cases. On the flip side, this however, means that gaining wider acceptance is not

¹ It is not claimed here that the AEHR would be oblivious to these issues (Association of European Border Regions, 2012). Rather, it is just pinpointed that they are not covered by *b-solutions*.

² The categorisation involved making subjective decisions based on the case descriptions outlined in sections titled: “*What’s next*”. Thus, it is admitted that another reviewer might have ended up with (slightly) different numbers. However, there is no uncertainty about the “final” outcome: having gained wider acceptance is a rare occurrence compared to cases, where such acceptance has yet to be achieved.

1. on the agenda for planned future actions for many of the analysed cases.
2. There are no indications that the cases would have considered whether the proposed solutions can potentially have negative consequences on cross-border labour mobility and markets.
3. There are also no indications that the cases would have considered the possibility that the solutions might benefit economic hubs farther away from the border more than the actual cross-border case region.

These results will be benchmarked against the previous literature on cross-border labour mobility and markets in the next section.

A literature-based synthesis: Are the results of *b-solutions* in line with the state-of-the-art?

First, it needs to be stressed that it was not the goal of the project to contribute to a theoretical perspective. Rather, the goal is a practical one: identifying ways that the border barriers affect local societies and finding solutions in overcoming these obstacles. However, theory and practice do not need to be two completely different spheres of life: while practice can help to shape theory, theory can help to better design practice. Thus, the idea behind this synthesis is a firm belief that a solid theoretical understanding can

help practical project-related work in achieving increased impact. As such, when contrasting the results of *b-solutions* to the reviewed academic literature on cross-border labour mobility and markets a number of interconnected issues arise.

First, the results of *b-solutions* are clearly aimed at pull factors (or lowering of repel factors) by making crossing of borders more attractive/appealing for cross-border workers. This raises a relevant question regarding the impact of the solutions: is the focus on pull (and repel) factors enough for cross-border labour markets to emerge if push (and keep) factors remain unchanged? That is, if the wish to cross the border is weak, what is the impact of removing legal and administrative obstacles?

Second, since the solutions (apart from few encouraging examples) do not address cultural, social and mental barriers in addition to the legal and administrative obstacles, the results of the *b-solutions* might end up helping a small minority of persons who are already willing to cross the border rather than encouraging immobile workers to venture beyond the familiar.

Third, due to the nature of the project, *b-solutions* concentrates on cross-border differences in legal and administrative systems, that is, formal *institutions*. Since, it requires a wide and strong consensus to change legislation and/or administrative procedures it is relevant to ask whether there

really is broad willingness, beyond the organisations that have reached out to *b-solutions*, to implement the proposed solutions? While this is not the case for all the cases, it is nonetheless encouraging that about one third of them clearly indicated wider acceptance for implementing the suggested solutions.

Fourth, *b-solutions* views borders as barriers to be overcome in order to create more integrated cross-border labour markets. This outlook on borders is in line with practice. However, from a theoretical point of view (i.e., the *border functions* perspective) cross-border differences can also induce labour mobility. Consequently, again on a more theoretical note, it is relevant to consider whether removing obstacles (e.g., in terms of social security) is sensible for all cases, if they might (while obscuring some workers) in fact, at the same time be a rationale that drives others to cross the border?

Finally, the likelihood of border regions being just transit zones for cross-border mobility that is directed towards national economic hubs is not considered by *b-solutions*. While such analyses have been outside the scope and targets of *b-solutions*, this observation together with the discussion on *bypassers* nonetheless prompts a relevant question: in cases where legislative and administrative changes are aimed at the national level, will the results of *b-solutions* really benefit the intended border regions or will the “fruits” of the integration development flow to the non-border economic hubs of the country?

Synthesis and conclusions

It is important to stress that, at least to the layman’s eyes of a social scientist, the legal advice given by the experts seems solid. As such, the paper is not going against the mainstream (Chirodea et al. 2024; Medeiros et al. 2022, 2023, 2024) in saying that *b-solutions* would not have had a positive role in removing legal and administrative obstacles that hinder cross-border interaction and cooperation. Similarly, it is not urging *b-solutions* to change its targets from the relevant practical focus it has to a more theoretical one. Rather, the idea here was laid more on the likely impacts of the results of *b-solutions*. That is, instead of disentangling whether the individual solutions would, if implemented, remove the observed obstacle or not, this review aimed at underlining theoretical issues that if incorporated into the practical work could help the project and its important goal of boosting cross-border labour mobility and facilitating cross-border labour market integration. The identified issues, thus, pave the way for suggestions for improvement.

Cross-border mobility is induced by both pull and push factors. The former are those reasons why the other side of the border might seem more appealing, while the latter act as motivation for workers to cross the border. The focus of *b-solutions* is on pull factors. Therefore, it is advisable to broaden the scope of *b-solutions* and acknowledge the importance of push factors. Without changes in push factors, the results of

b-solutions might remain less impactful than intended. As such, it would be reasonable to estimate –as a type of cost-benefit analysis– how much cross-border labour mobility are the proposed solutions likely to induce. That is, to find those cases, where push factors are also present or imminent in order to focus the work on the most “lucrative” solutions.

Similarly, the focus on legal and administrative obstacles largely leaves aside other types of barriers that result in cross-border labour immobility. Thus, while it is naturally a lot to ask from a single project to broaden its scope, *b-solutions* could benefit from venturing more extensively beyond its focus on legal and administrative obstacles and also attempt to tackle the cultural, social and mental barriers that hinder the emergence of well-integrated cross-border labour markets.

Another reason for potential ambiguity is the issue of confirming wider acceptance necessary for implementing the proposed changes to formal institutions (laws and regulations). As such, *b-solutions* could consider including a formal investigation into whether the required actors for carrying out the proposed solutions are on board or not. This would not only help to pinpoint the likelihood that the solutions will be implemented in the future but also help other border regions contemplating similar changes to identify the work required to drive such processes.

Finally, the potential negative impacts of removing cross-border obstacles could also be considered by *b-solutions* to determine, whether the obstacles can in some cases actually work as a rationale for cross-border labour mobility. In such cases, removing the obstacles might not be the most sensible solution. Similarly, the *b-solutions* could benefit from spatial analyses focusing on cross-border labour flows to evaluate whether the proposed solutions are more likely to be beneficial for the case study border regions or profit the already economically well-off metropolitan regions farther away from the border. This would help *b-solutions* to indicate where finetuning of the solutions is necessary to direct them more clearly for the benefit of border regions.

To conclude, it is admitted that it is hard to pinpoint the impact of *b-solutions*. It is very evident that the project has made a significant contribution in boosting cross-border social and economic activity. However, what remains ambiguous is the magnitude (or volume) of the impact. Since, the aim of removing legal and administrative obstacles of cross-border labour mobility and markets is a worthy cause relevant data should be gathered to measure the exact success of the project. In other words, what seems to be missing from truly understanding the value of *b-solutions* is a formal ex-post impact assessment. This assessment should include an indication whether the proposed solutions have been carried out and, if implemented, an estimation on the magnitude (or volume) of the impact in terms of positive measurable changes in cross-border labour mobility.

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