

***b-solutions*: Taking Down Border Barriers for a More Integrated Europe. Introductory Notes**

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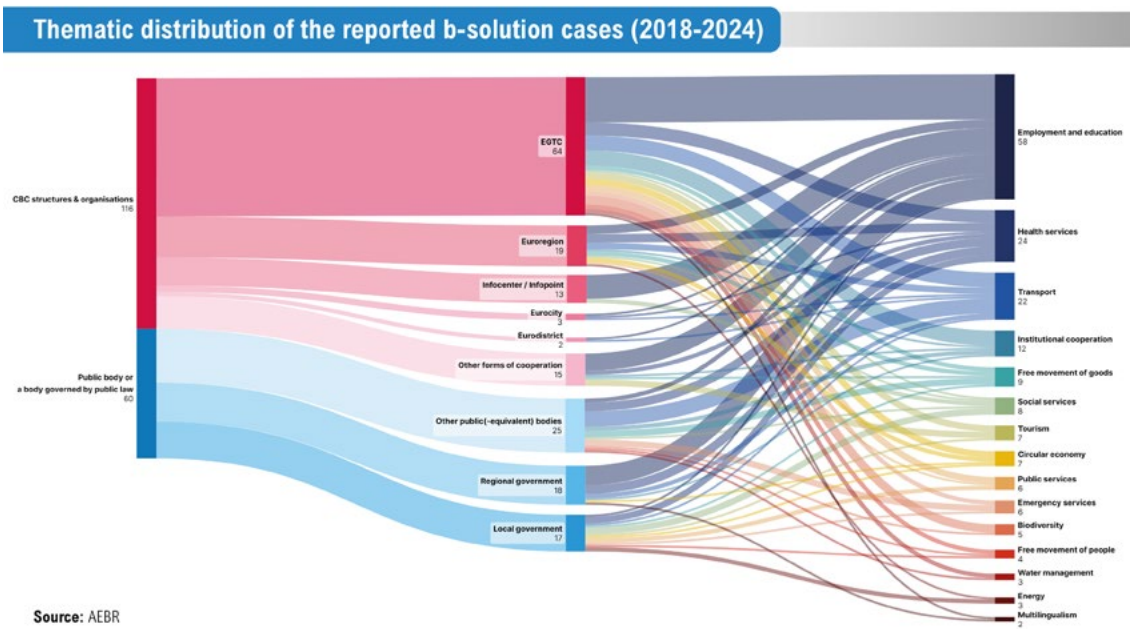
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Cross-border cooperation (CBC) has become part of the political identity of the European Union as it contributes to achieving a more cooperative and integrated future. Moreover, CBC is vital to developing a territorially optimised European Cohesion Policy and addressing a range of other EU policy agendas that include climate action, civil protection, emergency planning, a green transition and deepening of the single market. The *b-solutions* initiative is a salutary reminder that the European Union is still a project in the making and that its future as a coherent and cohesive space very much depends on the political will of member states. Europe's borderlands are microcosms of European diversity and laboratories of integration – what happens there tells us a lot about where the EU as a political community is headed. Border regions are, equally, places of high innovation potential, of the kind of smart and flexible thinking which supports collaborative approaches with benefits for all, across and beyond borders.

In well over 170 case studies collected since 2017, *b-solutions* has documented the many ways in which cross-border cooperation does not work as it should. Whether it be a lack of coordination of emergency services, mismatches in health insurance, administrative obstacles to entrepreneurship and cross-border labour mobility or a lack of environmental cooperation, the EU is full of resolvable obstacles to deeper integration. Indeed, the stories of border obstacles are largely one of mismatches or disparities between networked social space and the administrative geographies of vital public goods and services. Welfare-state cultures and their bureaucracies may have helped define national identities but they often seem not to have moved beyond a certain national centralism – often they are inflexible in accommodating the needs of a very diverse EU. These obstacles require attention in order to promote a Europe that is truly closer to citizens. In response, *b-solutions* offers expert advice to public agencies dealing with problematic cross-border issues. Its main objectives are to help

CBC actors understand legal and administrative obstacles and thus identify sustainable solutions as well as raise greater political and public awareness of the significance of cross-border cooperation.

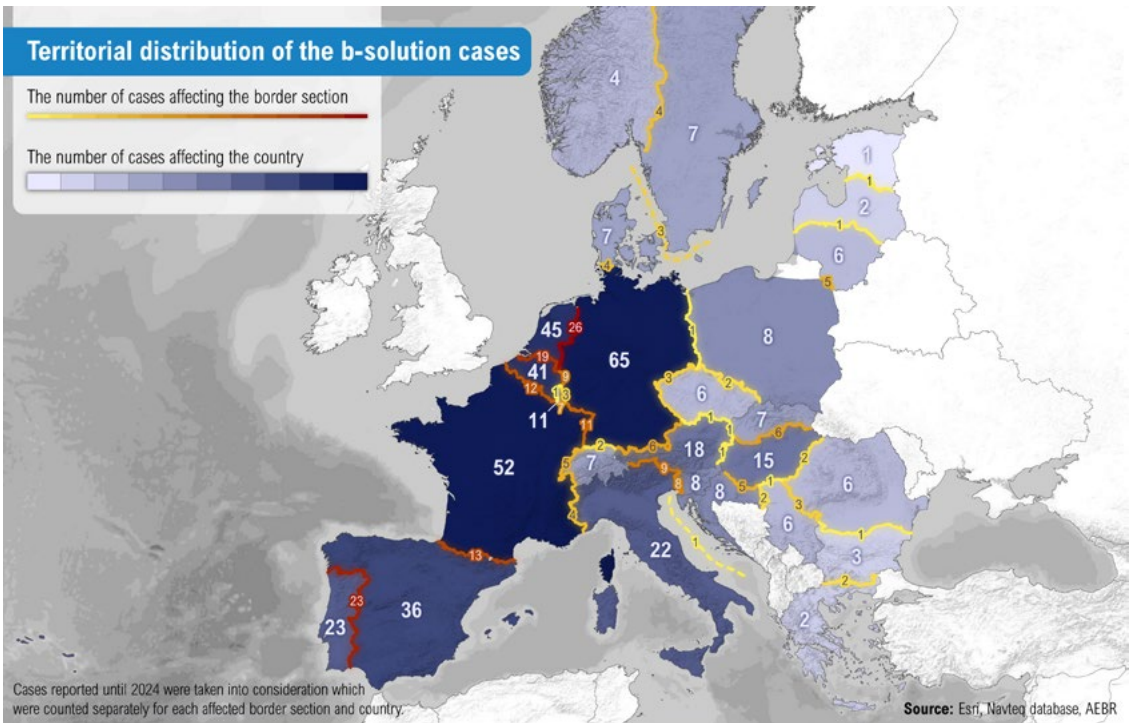
Figure 1. Thematic distribution of the b-solutions cases



Source: Association of European Border Regions' database

Figure 1 provides a thematic distribution of *b-solutions* cases reported between 2018 and 2024 and indicates the major obstacles that have prompted border regional organisations and institutions to engage with *b-solutions*. Figure 2 shows the geographical distribution of these cases. France and Germany top the list followed by Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and Italy. Nordic countries have also hosted strategically important cases which have supported the Nordic Council of Ministers' ongoing work. Central, Eastern and Southern Europe provide a rich basis for further *b-solutions* work, as do the Baltic States.

Figure 2. Territorial distribution of the *b-solutions* cases



Source: Association of European Border Regions' database

The various contributors to this publication provide insights into the experiences of problem-solving across EU borders and the role of the *b-solutions* initiative. Eduardo Medeiros discusses how *b-solutions* has promoted both hard and soft territorial governance processes in order to deal with issues in a nuanced manner. Formal governance is needed to change existing regulations, legislation and spatial plans. However, participatory and co-creative approaches are vital to negotiating pragmatic solutions and changing ways of thinking about CBC obstacles and processes. Peter Ulrich examines the role of European Groupings of

Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) in solving border obstacles and creating innovative models of collaboration. EGTCs are the most advanced form of such cooperation in terms of creating joint deliberative bodies between states. Nevertheless, Ulrich argues they are incomplete – for example, they still lack legal competence to address issues related to taxation, social security benefits and negotiating wage levels. Following on this, Teemu Makkonen provides insight into the perennial problem of Europe's weakly integrated labour markets and its consequences for labour mobility. *b-solutions* has suggested pathways to remove legal

and administrative obstacles. Makkonen also argues that future policies need to dedicate more attention to other factors influencing cross-border labour mobility such as, cultural, social and mental barriers.

With a focus on healthcare, Caitriona Mullan reminds us that local and regional provision of services to cross-border catchments, and enablement of citizens to access services across borders, are vital to achieving greater wellbeing and service provision innovation for future growth and competitiveness. One major takeaway from *b-solutions* is that the nurturing of cross-border health (CBH) systems and improved population health will support a sustainable future for Europe's border regions and a greater general degree of equity within the EU. Similarly, Péter Balogh suggests that *b-solutions* has made progress in CBH by suggesting tailor-made solutions to obstacles on a case-by-case basis. These solutions have in fact been accepted by local stakeholders who have forwarded them to the authorities in charge and asked them to implement the proposals. Juan Manuel Trillo Santamaria, Roberto Vila-Lage and Valerià Paül welcome *b-solutions'* contributions to facilitating environmental cooperation between formal institutions. However, they indicate that a greater degree of engagement with local initiatives and civil society organisations will be necessary to raise awareness of environmental issues and the EU's Green Deal.

As an example of a *b-solution*, Martin Unfried and Pim Mertens discuss the new cross-border coordination point (schakelpunt) for the region between the Belgian Region Flanders and the Netherlands. The schakelpunt is an instrument that enables stakeholders with cross-border problems to identify appropriate institutions and administrative procedures that can provide solutions. In the Nordic context, a Border Obstacle Forum has been in operation since 2014 collecting information regarding barriers to the integration of border areas. Sara Svensson describes its workings, noting the significance of the Forum's new official name, the Freedom of Movement Council. The council has multilevel and multisectoral outreach and thus represents an innovative arrangement. It is thus partly a *b-solutions* success story. On the other hand, Svensson's case study reveals that obstacles hindering third-country nationals from working in other Nordic countries persist and that much needs to be done in order to achieve greater progress in labour mobility.

Sabine Zillmer deals with the more basic issue of active subsidiarity and legislative rights of citizens within local and regional cross-border contexts. Such rights are vital to enhancing proximity between citizens and the EU's policy agendas. In the many cases covered by the project, *b-solutions* has suggested numerous legal proposals for creating new territorial contexts. What stands out is a clear need to focus more attention on

legislational rights that facilitate cross-border access of social services, such as child care, health care, education, as well as housing and labour markets.

In concluding, we hope that this publication will not only be of interest but also inspiration to policymakers, practitioners, politicians, community representatives, entrepreneurs, and professional and sectoral stakeholders representing different dimensions of our economic, social and cultural life. With this publication we underline

the significance of the *b-solutions* initiative and the inherent value of its continued practical contribution to greater European integration. We invite border regions across the European Union and on its external borders to engage, explore, and experience the value of learning from local experience in transcending border obstacles. We believe that releasing the full potential of border regions through improved cooperation will contribute to creating a more locally anchored and responsive European Union.