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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2023-04-03

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Medeiros, E., Ramírez, M. G., Brustia, G., Dellagiacoma, A. . & Mullan, C. A (2023). Reducing border barriers for cross-border commuters in Europe via the EU b-solutions initiative . European Planning Studies. 31 (4), 822-841

Further information on publisher's website:

10.1080/09654313.2022.2093606

Publisher's copyright statement:

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Reducing border barriers for cross-border commuters in Europe via the EU *b-solutions* initiative

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Abstract

For more than six decades, the European Union (EU) has promoted, one way or the other, systematic European territorial integration, understood as the process of reducing many kinds of cross-border barriers. This article debates the role of the EU *b-solutions* initiative in facilitating cross-border commuting in Europe via its contribution to a body of knowledge, which, in its practical application, has the potential to act as a resource to be drawn on in the mitigation of a wide range of legal-administrative barriers. A theoretical framework for relating cross-border commuting and cross-border barriers is set out, and existing cases from the *b-solutions* initiative are mapped against it. The authors demonstrate the framework's value as a tool for determining the relevance of cross-border obstacles and solution factors for the issue of cross-border commuting. The paper concludes that the EU *b-solutions* contributed with concrete policy actions as well as a body of knowledge and solution-orientated planning towards reducing a range of legal-administrative cross-border barriers in Europe, and therefore represents a set of *lebenswelt* interventions contributing to the potential for increasing cross-border commuting flows.

Keywords: EU *b-solutions*, cross-border cooperation, barrier effect, legal and administrative obstacles, cross-border commuting

1. Introduction

A significant goal of cross-border cooperation (CBC) is to reduce and mitigate cross-border barriers (Medeiros, 2021), even though, according to Svensson (2013), this cooperation in Europe might be very often grant-driven rather than policy-driven. The motivation for CBC is a complex issue, with very different components depending on every region and player. In this article, we consider the reduction and mitigation of obstacles to cooperation as process objectives towards the ultimate goal of achieving greater integration of border regions and border zones. They are already responsible for 30% of EU GDP (Broersma et al., 2020) and also are key interface zones of importance for the broader process of European cohesion and integration. The most prevailing cross border barriers in Europe have a legal and administrative character (EC, 2016). Beyond these, in a continent characterised by a patchwork of nation states (AEBR, 2008), many other types of cross-border barriers, or obstacles, affect cross-border commuters. These, according to EU law, include anyone who works in one EU country but lives in another and returns daily, or at least once a week (Regulation (EC) No 883/2004). These barriers include physical accessibility, socio-cultural and economic related barriers (Medeiros, 2011), and also psychological ones (Guillermo-Ramirez, 2018).

Despite all positive advances in breaking down national barriers since the early years of the EU by implementing the four freedoms, including the freedom of movement (Kaiser & McMahon, 2017), it has become a common place to argue that national borders still pose important barriers to all sorts of flows in Europe, and that European integration can only be achieved by systematically mitigating those barriers (Cappelli & Montobbio, 2016). For some, positive European integration with positive values such as social protection, can only be achieved with the intervention of supranational entities, such as the EU (Majone, 2006). A similar narrative can be painted on the importance of cross-border entities to stimulate CBC processes in all barrier effect dimensions (Medeiros, 2011), including those related to cross-border commuting flows.

By recognising the potential negative impacts on regional border economies and the need to provide a functioning single market facilitating all sorts of cross-border flows, including cross-border commuting, the European Commission (EC) supported several initiatives focused on European border areas. These included the Interreg Community Initiative, launched in 1990 and transformed into one of EU Cohesion Policy's main goals in 2007 (Reitel et al., 2018). In its strand A, Interreg aimed to prepare European border areas for the opening of the single market, with an eye to economic and social cohesion (EC, 1990). Indeed, for Danson and De Souza (2012), the creation of the Interreg programme was the result of the recognition that the marginalised socioeconomic character of many

EU border areas was mainly due to the presence of cross-border barriers limiting territorial integration.

Despite the EU Interreg-A programmes' positive impacts in reducing many kinds of border barriers across Europe (Medeiros, 2015), relatively recent EU and Committee of the Regions (CoR) surveys (EC, 2016; 2019, 2021b) have confirmed the persistence of several cross-border obstacles to cross-border mobility. Hence, following the findings of the 2015-17 EU Cross-Border Review, which collected updated data on persistent border obstacles in Europe, the EC adopted the Communication 'Boosting growth and cohesion in EU Border regions' on 20 September 2017 (EC, 2017a). The *Communication* paved the way for the implementation, among other measures, of the EU *b-solutions* pilot initiative in 2018 by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), aimed at tackling legal and administrative border obstacles and difficulties along EU internal land borders.

This particular focus on legal and administrative cross-border obstacles stems from the EU cross-border review findings that these types of obstacles pose more "problems to the daily lives of many Europeans, particularly cross-border commuters" (Medeiros et al., 2022: 4). Further examination of the data collected under the EU cross-border review also revealed that cultural barriers such as language, alongside barriers related to poor physical accessibility (e.g. public transport) are also regarded by many Europeans as problematic cross-border barriers to their daily lives (Medeiros, 2018a).

Curiously, in a globalisation context, there is a perception that borders tend to function less as barriers and more as bridges for people and material flows (Schoik et al., 2004). Crucially, in some cases, borders are seen as boosters of work-related mobility due to the presence of economic differences in wages and housing (Möller et al., 2018). Yet, they can, sometimes, act as communication barriers (Krätke, 1999). However, it is widely recognised that the degree and dynamics of CBC are greatly affected by the level of cross-border barriers of all sorts (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018). Borders also affect commuting and other types of cross-border mobilities such as shopping, tourism, migration (Möller et al., 2018), as well as trade flows (Ferreira, 2016). Hence, "removing barriers to labour mobility is expected to contribute to processes of spatial integration in cross-border regions, by an efficient allocation of labour and consequently a convergence between territories separated by a common border" (Pires & Nunes, 2018: 376).

Border barriers have been evolving with increasing cooperation and integration in Europe as a result of successive EU enlargements, and the systematic process of EU integration in several policy arenas (Makkonen & Williams, 2016). However, for Lundén (2018: 105), one of the most persisting barriers to cooperation is the hierarchical asymmetry between different administrative levels. This asymmetry occurs when "the legal authority at a certain level in the domestic hierarchy does not

match the authority of the neighbouring trans-border authority at the corresponding, or almost corresponding level". This is further complicated by the fact that "even domestic political hierarchies might be poorly coordinated". Similarly, Knippschild (2011) asserts that institutional asymmetries within cooperating municipalities and regional administrations imply more difficult coordination between potential cooperating administrative units. AEHR, in a recent publication by the European Commission on a major study of cross-border patient mobility, has also stated the importance of the involvement of multi-level stakeholders in developing the necessary governance for operable solutions to such asymmetries and has termed this 'active subsidiarity' (AEHR & EC, 2022).

In this context, this article seeks to analyse the implementation of the EU *b-solutions* initiative and the potential contribution of the evidence generated by the project to reducing legal-administrative barriers across Europe and consequently as a facilitator of cross-border commuting. It does this by aligning the existing outputs of the work of the *b-solutions* initiative with a proposed framework for understanding factors in cross-border commuting. The article's main theoretical contribution is the proposal and evidencing of a comprehensive link between cross-border commuting elements and barrier effect dimensions, through drawing on the body of work of *b-solutions*. As a guide, the following research question is posed: in which manner the EU *b-solutions* initiative is implicated in facilitating cross-border commuting flows across Europe?

A fuller response to the above research question will, in due course, be possible if a longitudinal evaluation of impacts and effects of the initiative were to be carried out. Before making evaluative analysis, however, the identification and assembly of an evidence base is essential, and this article is simply a first attempt to provide an overview of the implementation of the *b-solutions* projects focused on facilitating cross-border commuting in Europe. The article does not therefore seek to draw conclusions which cannot yet be made because the evidence is not yet available. It does, however, provide a snapshot of empirical evidence which is being gathered in a context that is informed by the principles of action research. In essence, this article sets out the theoretical framework and presents a mapping of the total number of cases which demonstrate a relevance for the theoretical framework for understanding cross-border commuting (and the barriers to it). The cases constitute an evidence base of primary material which form the basis of further research aiming at further examine the topic. This article also provides a narrative of a selected number of these cases against the relevant domains of the theoretical framework.

Therefore, the article aims to illustrate and reference the existing evidence base gathered through the *b-solutions*, representing a body of knowledge for analytical and practical purposes. It can also be applied to the further resolution of obstacles to cross-border commuting. Following this initial section, the article sets out the theoretical framework for cross-border commuting factors

developed through an analysis of the *b-solutions* initiative (section 2), summarises the methodological approach (section 3), provides an introduction to *b-solutions* (section 3), and finally presents an overview of the evidence drawn from the ninety cases generated by this initiative at the time of writing (section 4).

2. Cross-border commuting and border barriers – a theoretical framework

According to Huber and Nowotny (2013: 1463), "regional labour mobility can be achieved through either migration or commuting". A rich vein of theoretical reasoning on cross-border commuting asserts that it "remains the most important indicator of integration dynamics in border regions, as other flow patterns are even harder to address" (Chilla & Heugel, 2022: 3). For Gottholmseder and Theurl (2007), there are several cross-border commuting determinants, including: (i) age - the age distribution for cross-border workers has a significant peak at about 40 years; (ii) gender - women with children expect higher compensation for commuting and are thus, *ceteris paribus*, less mobile than women without children; (iii) level of education – higher levels of education translate into better language skills; (iv) partnership - existence of a partner; (v) children - existence of children; (vi) long-term-care - effect of older family members; (vii) employment sector - the economic structure of the jurisdictions in the involved regions; (viii) open-mindedness - towards other countries and cultures; (ix) distance to the nearest border - people living close to a border might find it much easier to become cross-border workers than those living far away from it since cross-border commuting involves less commuting time and costs.

Critical reviews of literature published in relation to commuting in general reveal a variety of understandings - across Europe and globally – of the nature, influencing factors and scope of what may be understood by the general term 'commuting'. The rich variety of approaches used in the design of census data capture relating to commuting (Murphy et al. 2013) demonstrates the multiplicity of factors which may be focused on commuting- ultimately influenced by the purpose of the data capture and the question of who wishes to know what and for what purpose. In the same sense, the purpose of assembling the evidence generated by the *b-solutions* project, which may be relevant for the resolution of obstacles to cross-border commuting, is ultimately to demonstrate a wider value of the *b-solutions* studies in informing resolution of obstacles to overall cross-border integration in border regions and between Member States.

While cross-border labour markets and labour mobility are an essential feature of cross-border integration of functional economic areas, the totality of integration is more holistically reflected by additional types of cross-border travel for the purposes of economic participation and contribution,

including access to goods and services. Therefore, while the majority of related literature tends to assume commuting as a phenomenon linked to employment and travel to the working place, we have extended the scope of what may be understood as cross-border commuting to include other forms of economic participation and activity (e.g. shopping and access to education), acknowledging that these are also areas which research has focused on for their contribution to cross-border commuting (Murphy et al., 2013).

In the scope of this article, therefore, cross-border commuting is not to be considered as limited to work on the other side of the border. It is to be understood in more general terms as a synonym of mobility, encompassing other activities such as touristic travelling and cross-border shopping (Mathä et al., 2017). At the same time, the effects of cross-border commuting on families' relationships with people close to cross-border commuters (Telve, 2019), and processes of spatial integration in cross-border areas (Möller et al., 2018), add an extra layer of complexity to this theoretical analysis. In a complementary manner, Klatt (2014: 353) launches the hypothesis that "(un)familiarity explains motives for decisions to commute or to employ commuters", while Wiesböck and Verwiebe (2017) identify some sociodemographic factors like human capital, social capital, and labour market characteristics as major reasons for cross-border commuting. In the context of researching cross-border commuting as an indicator of the functionality of cross-border regional economies, it is also important to acknowledge additional features such as seasonal commuting, for example, concerning regions which have a higher dependency on tourism as a sector of the economy (Murphy et al., 2013).

In all, cross-border commuting is a complex and place-based process, depending on all the previously mentioned factors but also on the barrier effect intensity in a given cross-border passage (Svensson & Balogh, 2018). In labour market terms, cross-border commuting behaviour can be understood as directly impacted by the spatial structure of cross-border labour markets and broader regional economies. It also interacts with other factors and indicators for cross-border integration, such as residential integration in urban border zones (Décoville et al., 2013). And as such, it is not the only lens through which the *b-solutions* evidence base can be viewed.

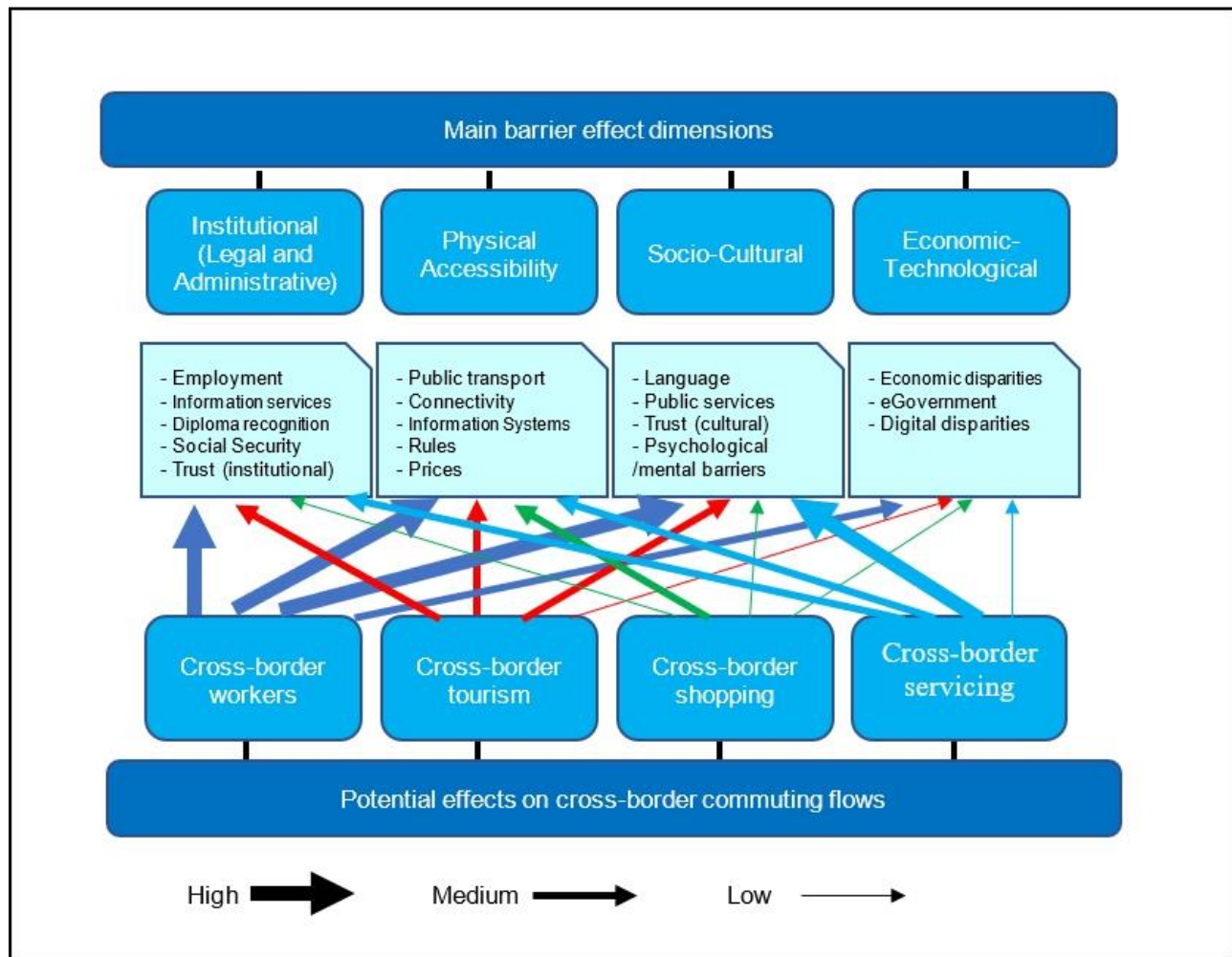
Impelled by the analysis of the Interreg-A most significant impacts on reducing border barriers in several European border areas, Medeiros (2011) proposes a barrier effect typology encompassing five main dimensions: (i) institutional barriers, including legal and administrative ones; (ii) physical accessibility-related barriers, including cross-border public transport, roads and railways; (iii) socio-cultural related barriers, including language and other cultural differences; (iv) economic and technological related barriers, including economic disparities and communication; and (v) environmental-related barriers such as the lack of agreements between countries in managing a cross-

border natural protected area. In addition, and in a structural sense linked to the structure/agency debate in the study of commuting behaviours (Stilwell & Buckner 2013), AEBR suggests that cross-border commuting can be understood as an interaction between exogenous and endogenous factors. Exogenous factors are those which influence the environment in which commuting takes place with ease or with hindrances – such as public transport systems, motor vehicle mobility, accessibility of cross-border territories, economic and business activity creating labour markets, skills/education and employability measures, or civic and commercial sector provisions for multilingualism; and endogenous factors are those which influence personal choices of citizens in relation to cross-border commuting for different purposes – such as taxation and social insurance, access to childcare and related supports, access to healthcare and healthcare cost reimbursement, socio-cultural factors, etc.

The European Commission defines cross-border commuting in law within the context of the Social Security Regulation, which is aimed to create a legal framework for the transferability of social security provisions for the individual. Definitions or understandings of cross-border commuting -as with commuting in general- are by necessity subjective to the purpose of who is seeking to define this complex phenomenon. In this sense, AEBR can suggest an understanding of the term 'cross-border commuting' – relevant to the wider analysis of integration in border regions- to denote a combination of daily, weekly, monthly or seasonal travel between two spatial entities in neighbouring national jurisdictions for the specific purpose of economic participation and/or to access or provide public or commercial services and/or goods.

Figure 1 summarises the linking between the four of the aforementioned barrier effect dimensions which have relevance in influencing cross-border commuting flows in the context of the suggested definition above, and their potential level of influence in affecting them in four distinct main types: (i) cross-border workers; (ii) cross-border tourism; (iii) cross-border shopping; and (iv) cross-border servicing: using public services on the other side of the border. Here, it is possible to see that legal and administrative barriers, as well as physical accessibilities, have several crucial elements influencing cross-border commuting. It is also possible to infer that cross-border workers are more susceptible to persisting cross-border barriers as they often need to cross the border on a daily basis. They are also dependent on appropriate cross-border transport, employment and social security regulations, as well as on the knowledge of languages. In the following, citizens aiming to use cross-border public services on the other side of the border, also benefit from the availability of appropriate cross-border connectivity and public services. A mapping of ninety cases undertaken through the EU *b-solutions* initiative which, at the time of writing, is an ongoing project that AEBR manages in conjunction with the European Commission's DG REGIO, indicates that most of these cross-border

barriers are considered in various forms by EU *b-solutions*. The schema below shows a systemic model for understanding the interactional dynamics of the different cases.



Note: A different colour is associated with each potential effect on cross-border commuting flow. The thickness of the arrows was defined based on the extensive knowledge of the authors in cross-border barriers and cross-border commuting. For example, increasing cross-border workers in a given cross-border area has a high possibility to face persistent legal and administrative, physical accessibility, and social cultural barriers.

Figure 1. Border barriers affecting cross-border commuting. Source: own elaboration.

3. Methodological approach

Methodologically, the article draws mainly on desk-based research of the EU *b-solutions* 90 approved projects' database and respective evaluation reports. This has been complemented by reading related literature: EU *b-solutions* compendium reports and scientific literature on CBC and cross-border commuting. Furthermore, a Geographical Information System (GIS) is used to map the location of the approved 90 EU *b-solutions* and the number of projects implemented in each cross-border area

and policy theme. As stated, ninety *b-solution* cases were selected and implemented within eight thematic areas: institutional cooperation (33), employment (22), health (incl. emergency services) (17), (public) transport of passengers (11), multi-lingualism (3), evidence and data (2), e-government (1) and information services (1).

In detail, the analysis is supported by an in-depth review of the implemented EU *b-solutions* project to mapping relevant *b-solutions* cases for incrementing cross-border commuting flows: the mitigation of any of the four identified border barriers (institutional, physical, socio-cultural and economic-technological), in four types of commuting flows (cross-border workers, tourism, shopping and servicing). Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework supporting this analysis by relating the border barriers and the types of commuting flows. To present the evidence, this article covers the first stage of a two-step approach to analysing the evidence while demonstrating a sample of what a second step will look like. First, a matrix has been created whereby all cases undertaken by *b-solutions* at the time of writing (early 2022) have been classified initially according to the primary focus of the case. Each case in this matrix map is referenced according to the official *b-solutions* publication in which it appears, and the expert who provided the technical advice. The second step of the approach will involve the development of future publications containing a more narrative and reflective analysis of selected cases for each of the four themes relevant to conditions in which cross-border commuting may occur, in order to illustrate how any individual case may have a primary classification within one part of the analytical framework but may also offer empirical evidence for other parts of the framework.

Some points of consideration arose while mapping the cases, which are worth reflecting on here. All of them are demonstrative of the multifactorial nature of border obstacles. By implication, their solutions and their impact depend on either the exogenous or endogenous conditions in which cross-border commuting takes place. For example, a case involving changing of regulations to further enable cross-border car commuting may also have relevance for socio-cultural issues such as language, particularly when part of the case also addresses a move to multilingual availability of information for people on either side of a language border.

4. Overview of the EU *b-solutions* initiative

B-solutions is an initiative of the EC Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) to identify legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border cooperation and promote sustainable methods to resolve them. The first phase of this major strategic transeuropean multi-annual project was initially proposed for two years (2018-2019), but it was extended until 2021, addressing only

internal EU/EFTA land borders. 90 cases were analysed in this period. In the current second phase (2022-2023), the EU borders with pre-accession countries as well as maritime borders are also eligible. *b-solutions* was one of the initiatives promoted by the Commission's Communication COM (2017) 534 Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions, adopted on 20 September 2017 as a result of the Cross-Border Review launched in 2015. The second phase builds on the EC Report COM (2021)393 EU border regions: Living labs of European integration of 14 July 2021, to identify 120 new obstacles, but also to follow and boost the implementation of those solutions identified in the first phase, and making them visible.

DG Regio chose the AEBC to implement this initiative. The EU finances 95% of the costs through the ERDF Technical Assistance (Decisions C(2017)363 and C(2021)2359), and 5% is co-financed by the AEBC's own budget. The total cost of the initiative in 2018-2021 was € 1,078,406.84, and the budget for the second phase is € 2,105,263.16. This is an initiative of the EU within its territorial cooperation policy (which includes cross-border cooperation as a major component). While AEBC also retains close links with the Council of Europe on a range of issues and was established with its support in 1971, the *b-solutions* initiative is a major strategic project relating to policy domains which fall within the remit of the European Commission and cohesion policy. As such, it is resourced by the EC and driven by AEBC as a recognised organisation with expertise in cross border policy development and application, which also has special consultative status with the institutions of the EU. However, any information produced by other international organisations on (cross-)border hindrances might be used to identify new obstacles in any of the eligible borders

Despite the efforts undertaken until now by the EC, there are still many obstacles that affect territorial cooperation in EU internal and external border regions. They are varied and complex and require customised solutions at various levels of governance, and often cross-border institutional collaboration in order to be resolved effectively. In this context, the *b-solutions* initiative launched in 2018 the first out of four calls for proposals, with the main goal of identifying and promoting "sustainable methods of resolving border obstacles of a legal and/or administrative nature along EU internal land borders (including neighbouring EFTA countries), granting public authorities the possibility of testing effective ways of overcoming the hindrances that keep preventing a full-fledged cooperation across the borders" (AEBC & EC, 2020: 2). Through the resourcing of focused expert case studies analysing identified obstacles and presenting options and approaches likely to resolve obstacles, this initiative offers the opportunity to public bodies and cross-border structures to progress solutions to obstacles that prevent or hinder cross-border cooperation processes across Europe. In more detail, the EU *b-solutions* aims to:

1. Mitigate cross-border obstacles which are caused by a lack of coherence, inconsistencies or overlapping between legal provisions or administrative procedures on each side of the border but, particularly, because applicable European, national or regional/local legislation does not consider the specificity of cross-border interactions;
2. Increase the understanding of every specific obstacle (and potential solutions) among key stakeholders on both sides of the border at local, regional, national and EU levels;
3. Promote sustainable methods to solve cross-border obstacles via innovative proposals to inform further cross-border development and implementation by public authorities and/or via EU instruments (e. g. EU Interreg-A programmes);
4. Involve public bodies committed to jointly fostering, designing and agreeing on feasible solutions to reduce cross-border barrier effects;
5. Stimulate an increased exchange of information and mutual engagement between the variety of administration levels in border areas to make possible the generation of joint initiatives involving multi-level governance across borders;
6. Foster the replication of these approaches, make them available and promote them in other cross-border contexts.

Since the launch of the initiative at the end of 2017, proposals for 90 obstacles and *b-solutions* advice cases (Annex A) were assessed and selected from four open calls for proposals (10+33+23+24). During the first phase (2018-2019), 43 obstacles were selected for study, and as many *b-solutions* were proposed. In view of the success of the two first calls for proposals (Medeiros et al., 2022), the European Commission initially extended the initiative to run until the end of 2021. 47 cases were selected during this second phase under the third (23) and fourth (24) calls to receive legal support. All 90 cases have been analysed and summarised in two Compendiums (AEBR & EU, 2020 and 2022). This analysis is supplemented by a series of thematic publications, and a 'storytelling' one aimed at European citizens. The EC subsequently approved a new phase of the initiative which will gather a further fiche of cases and select approximately thirty cases for more detailed brokerage in an applied, evidence-driven context towards implementation.

In some border regions, particularly where cooperation capacity is low and cross-border cooperation is not a particularly high political priority, there has been lower engagement with the initiative. Conversely, various cross-border structures such as the cross-border hospital in Cerdanya, those alongside the Galicia-Norte (ES-PT) cooperation, at the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (NL-DE-BE) or the European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation (EGTC) GO (IT-SI) can be considered very positive examples. They have translated sound institutional CBC knowledge and motivation into

effective support for projects which have contributed to mitigating cross-border barriers and fomenting cross-border commuting.

Despite implementation challenges and limited financing, the EU *b-solutions* initiative can be regarded as a concrete and pro-active policy tool to provide a relevant contribution to mitigating legal and administrative obstacles in several European cross-border areas, although with different intensity in geographical terms. More concretely, this EU initiative has targeted cross-border barriers arising from gaps in institutional cooperation and thematic barriers in key areas related to cross-border mobility, cohesion and integration, such as employment and workforce mobility, access to health services, and public transport planning. In some cases, multilingualism forms part of identified solutions. The *b-solutions* contribution to the creation of multilingual solutions is something for additional and bespoke analysis- given also that the initiative continues and additional geographical impact in areas of low uptake is still possible under emerging calls at the time of writing. Existing publications by *b-solutions* and strategic communications undertaken to share the results of the initiative so far, will encourage additional uptake from regions which have not interacted with the project to date. In an evolving framework due to "the lessons learned since 2017, including those of the COVID-19 crisis", the Commission proposed in its 2021 report "to refocus the actions (including a new phase of *b-Solutions*) along four clusters: deeper institutional cooperation, more and better cross-border public services, vibrant cross-border labour markets, and border regions for the European Green Deal" (EC, 2021a). This focus was followed in the presentation of the results of the second two-year period of *b-solutions* (2020-2021) and will continue in the context of the new calls for proposals in the project phase initiated during 2022.

5. The EU *b-solutions* implications for cross-border commuting

5.1 *b-solutions*' geographical distribution per main theme

As regards the geographical distribution of the approved *b-solutions*' projects across European borders, they covered proposals from 18 EU Member States: FR and ES (15 each); NL, BE and DE (8 each); IT and HU (6); LT (5); AT, CZ & PT (3); LU, PL & SE (2); and BG, EE, SK & SI (1) (Figure 2). Their distribution among the thematic areas shows that most cases were related to institutional cooperation (33), followed by employment (22), health (including emergency services) (17) and (public) transport of passengers (11). There were just three on multilingualism, two on evidence and data and one each on e-government and information services. In a broader portrait per national borderline, Figure 3 presents an unbalanced geographical picture of *b-solutions* cases,

favouring a few cross-border areas, such as the Benelux and western Germany and on the Iberian Peninsula.

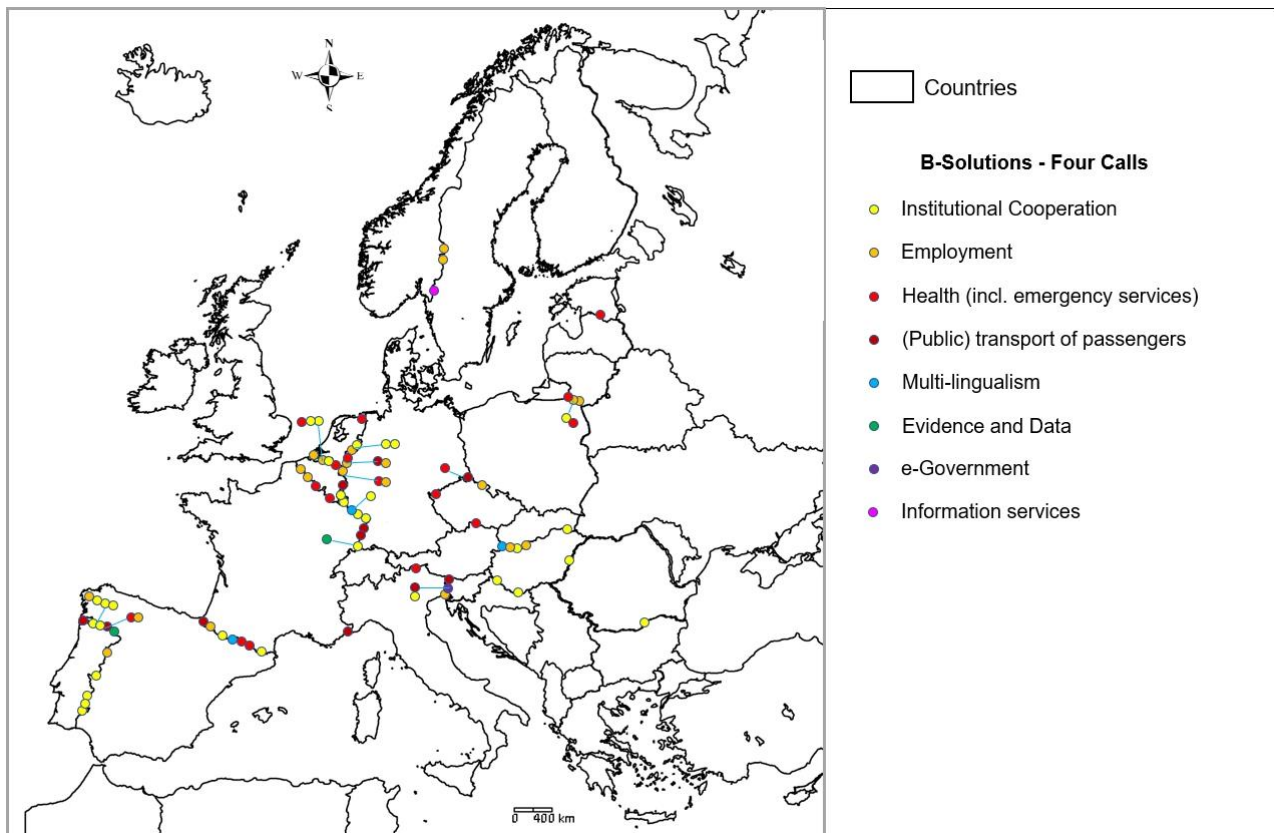


Figure 2. Precise location of the EU *b-solutions* approved cases per theme in the first four calls. Source: Own elaboration.

Looking at this geographical distribution, it is clear that border regions with higher established levels of cross-border cooperation have identified a higher number of obstacles. Regarding the missing borders, some cases were submitted but did not pass the selection process. On multilingualism, more cases would have been expected from around Germany, but those regions with language problems on their borders are also likely to find it very difficult to complete forms and follow instructions that are only available in English, to apply for the EU *b-solutions*. This has often been a major obstacle for local authorities to submit their cases. The application process also requires a detailed iteration of the proposal and rationale for the case. In this context, the EC and AEHR have reviewed the approach and are considering more user-friendly approaches to interacting with potential applicants and project participants. Awareness-raising of the opportunities presented remains a priority for this initiative as it moves forward (EC, 2021b). In this regard, the AEHR tried to address all public authorities on EU internal land borders, but again the main language of the initiative has been English. AEHR continues to review issues associated with the dissemination of

the opportunities for the regions that the initiative presents, to ensure that it is promoted as widely as possible.

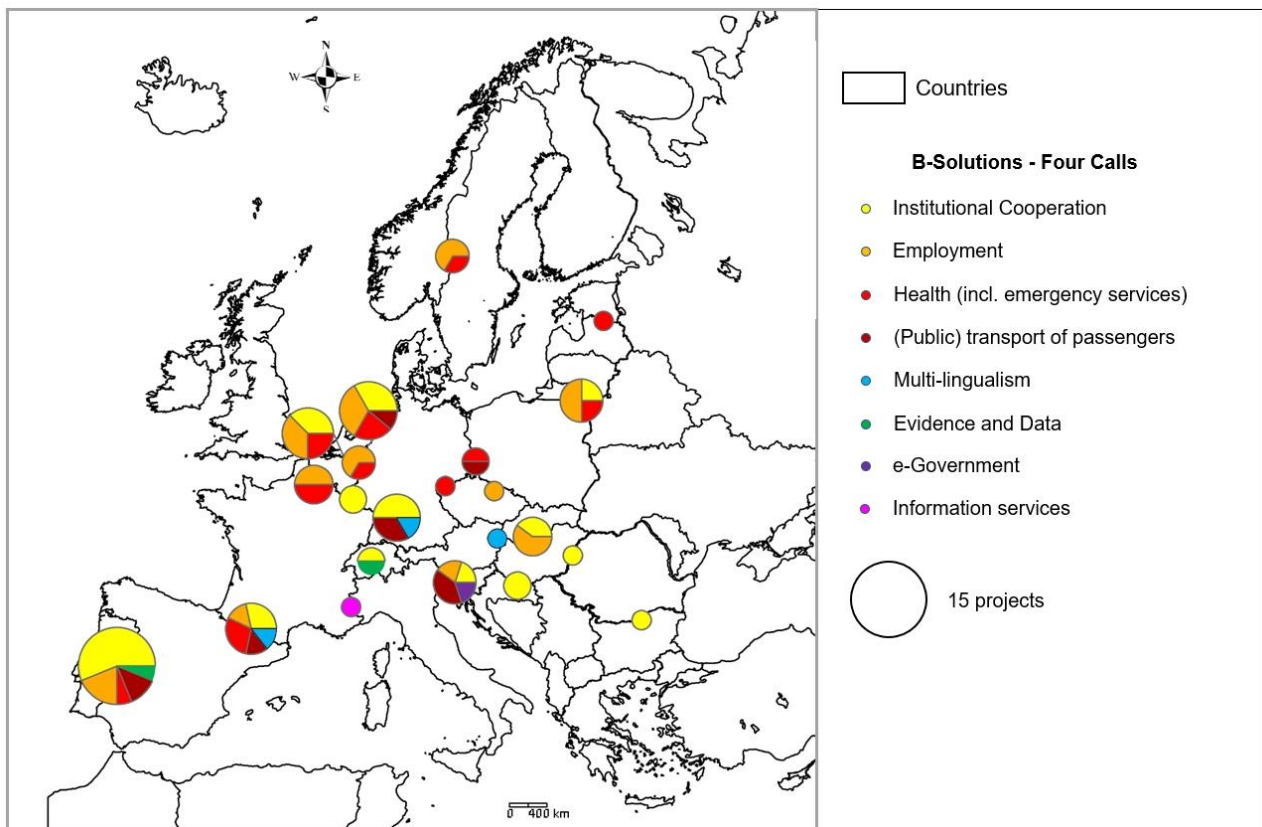


Figure 3. The distribution EU *b-solutions* per main thematic areas and border area, in the first four calls. Source: Own elaboration.

5.2 *b-solutions* and cross-border commuting: mapping of the cases against the theoretical framework

Ultimately, at the time of writing, it is clear that a longitudinal analysis of the potential effects of *b-solutions* cases on commuting in specific regions would be required in order to assess the ultimate impact of these initiatives on cross-border commuting levels in the future and to determine causality. A range of cases are in various stages of pre-implementation and implementation. However, what can be said (and illustrated) at this earlier stage with certainty is that, after mapping the full range of cases to date against the framework set out in this article, the *b-solutions* initiative has contributed to a body of applied knowledge, strategy and implementation planning for the development of some potential solutions to multiple barriers. According to the theoretical framework, fifty-six cases (out of a total ninety) are specifically relevant for one or more aspects of cross-border commuting. Furthermore, a significant number of these cases can be classified as relevant for cross-border commuting based on

the presented framework. This framework can also be applied as an analytical tool which is capable of eliciting a deeper, more qualitative analysis of an individual case or case type. This section includes a demonstration of how this can be applied to expand on the nature of a case, its related obstacle, and the potential relevance or effects of the identified solutions.

This section of the article, therefore, primarily deals with applying the theoretical framework for defining relevant factors in cross-border commuting in terms of the application of the framework against the full body of case studies produced by the AEBR *b-solutions* initiative. However, further research will focus on results from using the framework as an analytical lens in discussing a sample of cases in terms of their multifactorial nature. A sample case analysis is included in this article to demonstrate the approach offered by the theoretical framework for a more qualitative analysis of individual cases and their relevance to cross-border commuting in any given region.

According to existing literature, the *b-solutions* initiative has already provided a wide set of potential replicable policy solutions to mitigate all sorts of persisting legal and administrative cross-border barriers in Europe (Medeiros et al., 2022). Similarly, the EC acknowledges that the *b-solutions* initiative has been paving "the way for longer-term agreements between Member States and regions to definitively remove barriers" (EC, 2021a: 3). More particularly, "the approved cases proved to be relevant in view of the persisting legal–administrative cross-border barriers across Europe (...) and the *b-solutions* have provided crucial knowledge for reducing all sorts of legal and administrative border obstacles, and consequently to increasing the European territorial integration process" (Medeiros et al., 2022:11).

The multi-factorial nature of many of the cases supported by AEBR and EC through the *b-solutions* initiative presents a challenge in taxonomical terms when grouping key elements of this empirical evidence to demonstrate the framework hypothesis set out in this article. In fact, this framework also provides a reflexive model for examining key domains of each case, in analysing further how aspects of the various cases are relevant for one or more of the four key themes linked to the issue of cross-border commuting. These themes are related to the evidence presented: cross-border workers, tourism, cross-border shopping/(retail), and cross-border services.

A case example is included in Figure 4 to demonstrate what the framework provides for more in-depth analysis, which can generate considerations for a detailed understanding of the policy dimensions in individual scenarios. In this sense, this article can be seen as the initial one in a series which will facilitate in-depth interaction between the empirical evidence being gathered (to date, and as *b-solutions* progresses) and the process of refining the theoretical framework further.

Therefore, in collating an evidence base which supports the premises put forward in this article and, more specifically, AEBR has screened all the initial ninety *b-solutions* cases against the

theoretical framework set out in Section 2 of this article and mapped a total of 56 cases against the various domains of the framework. The number of cases against each of the domains, classified by the primary nature of the obstacle in each case, is summarised in Figure 5. Instead, Figure 4 shows the applicability of the theoretical framework as a tool for the deeper analysis of individual cases involving cross-border obstacles, using a case drawn from the ninety gathered to date by AEHR.

In most cases, there are high levels of interdependency and interrelatedness between factors influencing the conditions in which people choose to do cross-border commuting and in which decisions are made to facilitate cross-border commuting. The application by Member States of legal principles present in EU Directives can vary, and in many cases the translation of these into domestic administrative arrangements is a highly subjective matter, from which obstacles can arise at borders. This has been evidenced by AEHR in its study of cross-border patient mobility in selected EU Regions, published by the EC in 2022 (AEHR & EC, 2022) and is also demonstrated in the *b-solutions* case *Coorcurity: facilitating the coordination of social security systems for cross-border workers and pensioners* (Partner: EGTC Arrabona Ltd, HU-SK) (AEHR & EC, 2020).

Establishing a hierarchy of causes of obstacles is highly subjective, and something which can be heavily influenced by socio-cultural factors, and institutional cultures. Other technical enablers for cross-border commuting should be highlighted, such as processes aiming at facilitating cross-border workers to access their entitlement to paid leave to look after sick children, as in *the problem of the children's sickness certificate for frontier workers working in Germany and residing in the Netherlands* (Partner: Euregio Rhein-Maas-Nord, NL-DE).

As regards social insurance related b-solution projects, they also have a socio-cultural dimension, which can hinder a holistic view of the needs of cross-border workers. Such cases illustrate the fact that many cross-border workers are parents, and that childcare issues are themselves a documented factor influencing labour force participation that can either be overlooked or provided for. If combined with the global evidence of adequate childcare arrangements as a factor for labour force participation, then the resolution of such obstacles is also a factor in maintaining or increasing work-related cross border commuting. Furthermore, where obstacles to labour mobility have been documented or known officially for a long period of time, and where there is an existing framework at the European level for addressing the obstacle, such as exists in relation to social security, we decided to classify the primary obstacle as socio-cultural in nature, such as in the case of *cross-border mobility of jobseekers engaged in vocational training: centre and company accessibility* (Partner: EGTC Eurometropolis Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai, FR-BE) (AEHR & EC, 2021), which relates to a problem originally identified in a parliamentary report in 2007.

In reviewing the entire evidence base developed by AEBR through the *b-solutions* initiative, some reflections also arise on the wording of categories as it stands within the current iteration of the theoretical framework. So, for example, while we have mapped a significant number of projects which relate to cross-border workers, we have also applied an understanding of this category to include labour mobility and mobility for training and education purposes, given that, ultimately and in a longer-term sense, students often tend to find work where they have been trained and that, after all, removal of barriers to cross-border education and training opportunities has an implication for future increases in cross-border commuting.

Some other future refinements may be possible in the context of the category of 'cross border shopping', for instance, to include matters relating to the point-to-point cross-border trading of goods, in that goods and supplies logistics and delivery also account for a significant level of cross-border commuting, both to places of work and in the course of work. In regions which work to minimise barriers to localised cross-border trade and goods exchange as well as develop shared economic growth strategies, such as *Setting up of a Special Economic Zone on the cross-border area Nova Gorica – Gorizia* (Partner: Regional Development Agency of Northern Primorska ltd. Nova Gorica, SI) (AEBR & EC, 2021), this is likely, in the context of successful implementation, to contribute to the overall critical mass of commuting and build the features of a cross-border functional economic area.

In essence, this *b-solutions* initiative, via the implementation of 90 projects, has provided a pro-active policy support to facilitate an increased potential for cross-border commuting flows across Europe (see Annex A). This has been possible mostly by contributing to concrete and pro-active solutions to the legal and administrative obstacles identified on the ground. These have the potential (and in some cases are progressing already) to mitigate institutional barriers (e.g. having academic competences recognised, social security coverage and taxation certainty), as well as physical accessibility barriers (e.g. ensuring cross-border public transport services). In its next phase, it will also concentrate on cross-border areas not yet covered, the effective implementation of solutions, and other obstacles perceived by citizens and enterprises.

Conditions for Commuting Types of Barriers	For Cross Border Workers
Empirical Case Example:	Removal or simplification of the procedure to obtain the Car Circulation Guide for cross-border workers (EGTC Region Galicia – Norte de Portugal) ¹
Institutional (legal and Administrative) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employment - Information services - Diploma Recognition - Social Security - Trust (institutional) 	This case focused on conditions for cross-border commuting between Spain and Portugal, and specifically the additional challenges for workers residing in Spain but commuting to work in Portugal. The root obstacle identified – a norm within the Portuguese Tax Code- had both legal and administrative dimensions. This case involved disparity in institutional requirements (in Portugal and Spain) governing the use of cars for cross border commuting purposes. Portugal ordinarily requires cars not registered in Portugal to obtain a circulation permit for travel in Portugal. While there is an exemption to this permit for cross-border workers, the limits of the exemption (required if workers spending more than 6 months commuting), and the limits of the permit itself once obtained (only lasts one year), present a challenge for cross-border workers in longer-term commuting arrangements. The solution will be based on a collaborative approach by the institutions at regional level, through the EGTC, who will advocate for national legislative amendment to the I.56,4 sections of the Tax Code.
Physical Accessibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public transport - Connectivity - Information Systems - Rules - Prices 	This case focuses on a resolution which if implemented can better align rules to ensure that cross-border worker mobility has fewer obstacles in a day-to-day context. The case is particularly important in terms of regional connectivity because of an absence of workforce-orientated public transport services and a consequent reliance by cross-border workers on private cars and car pooling in order to get to their workplace.
Socio-cultural <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Languages - Public Services - Trust (cultural) - Psychological/mental barriers 	This case also featured language issues in direct relation to public services in that the permit and guidance for the permit- issued by the Portuguese authorities- was only available in Portuguese and not in Spanish.
Economic/Technological <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Economic disparities -E-Government -Digital disparities 	There could be potential for stakeholders involved in the solution to develop a digitalised form of support for drivers needing to access certifications or register exemption, based on the solution proposed in this case.

Figure 4: Example of individual case analysis using the theoretical framework. Own elaboration based on (AEBR & EC, 2021).

Conditions for Commuting Types of Barriers	For Cross Border Workers (includes skills training and educational mobility for further, higher and vocational training)	For Cross Border Tourism	For Cross Border Shopping/Retail	For Cross Border Servicing (development of shared services and joint approaches by services – public and private)
Institutional (legal and Administrative) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employment - Information services - Diploma Recognition - Social Security - Trust (institutional) 	17	2	1	1
Physical Accessibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public transport - Connectivity - Information Systems - Rules - Prices 	3	0	0	8
Socio-cultural <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Languages - Public Services - Trust (cultural) - Psychological/mental barriers 	8	1	0	4
Economic/Technological <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economic disparities - E-Government - Digital disparities 	8	0	1	2

Figure 5. Summary Mapping of *b-solutions* cases relevant for cross-border commuting. Source: own elaboration. Note: a detailed version of the table is contained as Annex A.

6. Conclusion

There is a myriad of determinants which affect cross-border commuting, including demographic, social, economic, educational, cultural, and geographic related factors. However, this article takes a novel lens to propose a theoretical framework relating the main barrier effect dimensions (institutional – legal and administrative, physical accessibility, socio-cultural and economic-technological) which can, directly and indirectly, affect main cross-border commuting flows: (i) cross-border workers; (ii) cross-border tourism; (iii) cross-border shopping and (iv) cross-border servicing. ~

Based on the analysis of the 90 approved EU *b-solutions* initiative projects so far, aimed to find solutions to mitigate the negative effects of existing legal or administrative cross-border barriers across Europe, the research concluded that this initiative has provided concrete and pro-active solutions to reduce all sorts of cross-border obstacles in several European cross-border areas. Notably, cross-border barriers related to institutional co-operation, as well as employment, health and public transport ones, have been favoured by the implementation of the EU *b-solutions*, which has, from testimonials provided to AEBC by border regional organisations in the course of evaluating project implementation, also benefited a number of European cross-border areas, mostly at the Iberian and Benelux borders. Indeed, many European cross-border regions did not yet benefit from this EU initiative and some barriers considered by Europeans in recent surveys as some of the most relevant border barriers for their daily lives (e.g. language) were not particularly targeted by the EU *b-solutions* '90 approved projects, as they probably should.

But how far has the EU *b-solutions* contributed to facilitating cross-border commuting flows across Europe? A helpful entry point to this analysis is the recognition that the intensity of cross-border flows is directly correlated with the level of cross-border barriers. Put differently, the lower the cross-border barriers are, the higher levels of cross-border commuting flows can be experienced. Based on the proposed methodological framework linking cross-border commuting flows and cross-border barriers, cross-border worker flows were facilitated directly or indirectly by the EU *b-solutions* by its concrete action in mitigating legal and administrative barriers related to employment, social-security, public transports and, in a minor degree, barriers relating to multilingualism and e-government implementation/interjurisdictional digital governance.

To fully evaluate the main contributions of EU *b-solutions* to increasing cross-border commuting across Europe, not only for cross-border workers, but also for cross-border tourists, shoppers and public services' seekers/beneficiaries, more data would need to be collected via enquiries in a wider range of European cross-border regions. Even so, the analysis of the available documentation on the implementation of the 90 cases financed via the EU *b-solutions*, across 27

cross-border regions in 21 Member States, plus 2 EFTA countries (Norway and Switzerland), Monaco and Andorra, for an overall total of 25 countries, demonstrates the importance of institutional commitment and the multi-level involvement of politicians and policymakers to reduce all sorts of border barriers in Europe. Equally important was the realisation that the EU *b-solutions* has shown that complementary types of responses, not directly related to removing specific legal or administrative obstacles, can effectively mitigate the negative impacts caused by such obstacles. Similarly, they have highlighted the need to amend the legal and administrative framework within which CBC projects are operating in Europe. At this stage of implementation, and with a view to offering a good-quality evidence base for further research, it is AEBR's recommendation to the academic community that an element of any future evaluation approach should be a place-based approach in which analysis of each obstacle should be performed considering the specificity of each border area and in the context of the geospatial dynamics of that region. The resulting data must be shared with stakeholders to increase capacity building to make informed policy decisions for tackling cross-border obstacles in a more effective and efficient manner.

As the body of evidence and knowledge generated by the *b-solutions* initiative increases and deepens, a further iteration or development of the analytical framework could also be useful to potentially analysing cases in terms of primary nature of the obstacle, as well as analysing the potential outcomes on other barrier types, which may be affected in the context of resolving the obstacle. The framework developed and presented, elaborating on the barrier types and adding cross-cutting themes makes it therefore possible for a '360-degree' reflection and evaluation of obstacles, beyond initial taxonomy and with a view to action-research approaches to implementing solutions. It is precisely this approach that AEBR will take from 2022 onwards in a subsequent phase of the *b-solutions* initiative. It is hoped that this process may assist with creating evidence worth drawing on in the problematic area of systematising hierarchies of factors which influence cross-border commuting.

The discussion set out above should demonstrate that it is possible to understand the dynamic and highly locational nature of the factors that influence cross-border commuting in any area, while also making it possible for transferable knowledge to be drawn from specific cases. Additional factors are emerging which have implications for both the levels of cross border commuting and the understanding of cross-border commuting data as an indicator of integration or cohesion. These are likely to stimulate further reflection and consideration during the 2021-27 EU Cohesion programming period such as the implications of a green transformation agenda for understanding of regional connectivity systems underpinning commuting and workforce dynamics. One such example relates to development of sustainable forms of public transport and modal shift including cycling

connectivity and the extension of connectivity across borders. A second example relates to responses to the displacement of peoples as a result of war: such as supporting non-EU nationals to integrate into regional and cross-border workforces. This will, importantly, need to involve increasing regional digitalisation capacity across the EU to support a new wave of remote working in the context of a post-COVID-19 EU workforce, and recent innovations such as digital support of Ukrainian workers - displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine- who continue to work online, including educators and teachers. The increase in remote working (as both a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and a post-COVID-19 recovery measure) combined with EU Cohesion policy priorities such as digitalisation, influences labour mobility, contributes to increasingly accessible cross-border labour markets, and all the issues set out above may also impact the dynamics of physical cross-border commuting.

Further tracking of the effects of solutions, such as *Simplification of the procedures for hiring and teleworking across the ES-PT border* (Partner: EGTC Galicia-Norte de Portugal, ES-PT), and *Corona pandemic and home office: consequences for the social security and taxation of cross-border workers* (Partner: Grenzinforpunkt Aachen-Eurode, DE-BE-NL) may yield interesting results. In such contexts, it is possible that the status of cross-border commuting, as an indicator of economic integration and cohesion across borders, may evolve as additional or alternative indicators emerge as reflecting the overall economic health of border regions. Overall, and in any case, the first phases of *b-solutions* covered in this article already contain case studies relevant to cross-border commuting according to the logic of the framework presented. They will also be relevant in these emerging contexts of European transformation, such as the case study on E-Bike infrastructure *Tackling cross-border obstacles regarding e-bike sharing infrastructure* (Partner: Ministry of the German-speaking Community, BE); or in the cases advised by Peter Hansen on *Dutch-German cross-border employment of students originally from outside the EU* (Partner: The Economic Board Arnhem-Nijmegen, DE) and *Cross-border work for non-EU citizens* (Partner: Euregio Rhein-Maas-North, DE-NL).

At the time of writing, Europe is emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered unprecedented covidfencing measures across EU borders which are still limiting cross-mobility in most, if not all, European cross-border passages. There is a large-scale military conflict close the Eastern border of the EU. At present, no one can be certain of how the post COVID-19 European cross-border commuting flows will look like, and Europe is responding on an ongoing basis to the dynamic presented by millions of people displaced by war. New dynamics have arisen in the context of cross-border co-operation and the degree to which it is held to be desirable or otherwise, by various institutions and for various reasons which are largely related to the specific nature of any type of co-

operation under consideration. In a post-pandemic context, the EU *b-solutions* can be seen as a useful policy tool to produce necessary, up-to-date and detailed knowledge on persisting legal-administrative barriers which limit a full European Territorial Integration process and related cross-border commuting flows, as a concrete policy measure to attain the desired European Territorial Integration policy goal. As stated in a recent EC report on *EU border regions as living laboratories of European Integration* (EC, 2021a), vibrant cross-border labour markets with intense cross-border commuting require European cross-border regions to be seen as a 'single' territory with mitigated cross-border barriers, not only with regard to accessing public services, but also social security, skills and competences, education and training, and ultimately employment. Only through this alternative approach, which sees border regions as important economic and social interface areas which generate an innovation dynamic crucial for European cohesion, and which has been noted by the European Commission in its July 2021 report, can European cross-border commuting ~~can~~ be fully achieved.

Acknowledgements:

The authors are grateful for constructive comments and suggestions offered by the anonymous referees and the editor of this journal.

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- Note: Four of the authors work for the AEBR and are actively engaged in implementing the EU *b-solutions initiative*.