Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions

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PURPOSE: to propose measures and issue recommendations that make it easier for internal land border regions to cooperate, contribute to reducing hurdles and help border citizens and businesses use the full potential of these regions.

BACKGROUND: EU internal border regions contribute significantly to the socio-economic wealth of Europe. They are **geographic areas where European integration processes are experienced** in everyday life by individuals, businesses and public authorities.

The European Union (EU) and its immediate neighbours in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) count 40 internal land borders. The EU's internal border regions cover **40% of the Union's territory**, represent 30% of the population (150 million people), produce 30% of the Union's GDP and see nearly 2 million commuters pass through, including 1.3 million cross-border workers who represent 0.6% of the Union's working population as a whole.

Since 1990, **Interreg** funding has supported cross-border cooperation programmes along EU border regions including those with EFTA countries. Interreg has made a genuine difference to border regions and has contributed to their transformation. This work continues today, with just under **EUR 6 billion** from the EU budget earmarked for the Interreg 2014-2020 cross-border programmes.

However, evidence gathered by the Commission demonstrates that **border regions generally perform less well economically than other regions within a Member State**. Access to public services such as hospitals and universities is generally lower in border regions. Navigating between different administrative and legal systems is often still complex and costly.

The Commission considers it necessary to **act at EU level**, in cooperation with Member States, regions and other stakeholders to better exploit the potential of border regions. It suggests that the resolution of border problems be placed at the heart of cross-border cooperation programmes in the future.

A recent study on the economic impact of border obstacles on GDP and employment levels in internal land border regions suggests if only 20% of the existing obstacles were removed, border regions would still gain 2% in GDP. The estimated impact on jobs is equally important, with potential for over 1 million jobs.

CONTENT: this Communication highlights ways in which the EU and its Member States can **reduce the complexity, length and costs of cross-border interaction** and promote the pooling of services along internal borders.

The Commission advocates the implementation of **10 measures** which will be facilitated by the creation of a "**border focal point**" within the Commission whose role will include ensuring that future key actions by the Commission take into account cross-border regional aspects and share experiences and good practices with stakeholders.

- **Deepening cooperation and exchanges**: the Commission urges Member States and regions to establish a regular dialogue on border issues. It will set up an EU-wide professional online network where legal and administrative border issues and solutions can be presented and discussed between border stakeholders.
- **Improving the legislative process**: in its Better Regulation package adopted in 2015, the Commission proposed measures to ensure that territorial aspects are factored into policy options.
- **Enabling cross-border public administration**: the Commission will urge its ongoing and future e-government projects to engage border stakeholders in order to deliver cross-border public services that meet the needs of individuals and businesses.
- **Providing reliable and understandable information and assistance**: it is essential to have access to reliable and available information and problem-solving services on the living or working on the other side of the border. Once adopted, the proposed Regulation on the establishment of a "single digital gateway" shall contribute to this.
- **Supporting cross-border employment**: the positive effects of tools such as the European network of employment services (EURES), the rules on the coordination of social security systems, the EU Employment and Social Innovation Programme (EaSI) and the European Social Fund have not reached their full potential in border regions. Member States and regional authorities shall strengthen cooperation between public employment services in border regions.
- **Promoting border multi-lingualism**: Member States, regions and municipalities are urged to use life-long learning opportunities to step up efforts to promote bilingualism in border regions.
- **Facilitating cross-border accessibility**: lacking, insufficient or low-quality public transport services are still a reality for many citizens in border regions. A Commission study of missing rail links along internal borders will be available in 2018. Member States, regions and municipalities are therefore urged to step up their efforts to provide individuals with better quality, more integrated public transport services.
- **Promoting greater pooling of health care facilities**: a comprehensive mapping of cross-border health cooperation across the EU by the Commission will identify good practices and analyse future challenges. The communication mentions in this context the institutionalised agreement establishing seven organised cross-border health care zones on the Franco-Belgian border has been used by more than 20 000 patients who have received health care closer to their residence in the neighbouring country.
- **Considering the legal and financial framework for cross-border cooperation**: a number of Member States are considering the merits of a new instrument that would allow, on a voluntary basis and in agreement with the competent authorities, the regulation of a Member State to apply in the neighbouring Member State for a specific project or action of limited duration implemented in a border region at the initiative of local and/or regional authorities. A dialogue should start on how future funding programmes could contribute to solving cross-border problems.
- **Demonstrate cross-border interaction to inform decision-making**: Member States, under the coordination of the Statistical Office of the European Union, shall seek innovative methods of data collection that lend themselves to cross-border analysis.

The Commission will take action still in 2017 and in the coming years. The Border Focal Point will soon become operational so that the proposed actions can be implemented swiftly.