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Call for Proposals



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Background Information*

Within the 28 EU Member States and its neighbours in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) there are some 40 land borders. This means 448 NUTS-3 territories located alongside at least one national boundary. Around 150 million Europeans live in these regions, almost one third of EU population.

In the early 1990s, with the introduction of the *Single Market*, the *Interreg*¹ initiative was established to enable border regions to cooperate more closely with the objective of exploiting their common potential in order to alleviate the possible losses linked to the disappearance of certain border-related jobs. This initiative has now become a fully-fledged objective under the Union's Cohesion Policy. Thousands of projects have received financial support since 1990 to better exploit border regions' potential and to overcome existing difficulties such as reduced accessibility, lack of cross-border public services, less incentives for SMEs, etc.

Despite these efforts, border stakeholders voice their concern at the existence of persisting challenges —notably of a legal and/or administrative nature— faced by border citizens and businesses when interacting across the border. These have direct and indirect impacts on their daily life: certain activities are still more complicated to perform across an internal EU border than they are inside a Member State. For instance, it is still difficult to take up a job on the other side of the border or to get treated in a hospital there even if there is very close proximity.

Taken together, these legal and administrative obstacles are a clear brake to the development of the endogenous growth potential of border regions. A recent study has shown that border regions could become on average 8% richer if legal and administrative obstacles were removed². Thousands of jobs could also be created.

Taking action to promote the prosperity and quality of life in cross-border regions, which are a sort of 'minilabs of European integration' has become a political imperative.

So far, work undertaken by the Commission services has highlighted a number of legal and administrative obstacles along many EU internal borders. Over the past 18 months, the European Commission's *Cross-Border Review*³, launched during the 25th Anniversary of Interreg, has unveiled evidence to demonstrate that significant obstacles negatively affect life in border regions. Legal and/or administrative difficulties affect many aspects of life in border regions such as access to employment, access to healthcare, access to education and training, use of different technical standards, non-recognition of qualifications, lack of local cross-border public transport. Even in sectors where there is a comprehensive European legal framework or where coordination mechanisms exist at European level, obstacles appear which can be clearly linked to the presence of a national border.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/de/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/

² Politecnico di Milano (2017) "Quantification of legal and administrative border obstacles in land border regions". <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/evidence-and-data/quantification-effects-legal-and-administrative-border-obstacles-land-border>

³ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/de/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/cross-border/review/

On the other hand, there are in Europe numerous examples of institutional cooperation across borders that have made cross-border activities simpler, less costly and altogether more attractive. Cooperation associations such as the *Benelux Union* or the *Nordic Council of Ministers* aim at reducing the negative border effects between their members. At regional level, there are also examples such as the *Upper Rhine Conference*, and many euroregions, working communities, eurodistricts and EGTCs which have dotted European borders with more or less strong platforms to promote mutual knowledge and cooperation. However, the picture is rather patchy and is far from covering the entire EU territory.

The EU needs to build upon these good practices from different border regions in order to address legal and administrative barriers more effectively and more comprehensively. Through the Communication *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in European Border Regions* (COM(2017)534 of 20 September 2017)⁴, the European Commission commits to promoting deeper cooperation and new mechanisms to remove obstacles or prevent their emergence. A **Border Focal Point**, has been established in the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) to coordinate the implementation of the proposed action plan and to provide Member States and other players with support to address border issues. An **online professional network**⁵ to present and discuss legal and administrative obstacles and possible solutions has been created and it is operational since 16 January 2018. The present call for pilot projects (**b-solutions**) is yet another concrete action proposed in the Communication and now put into practice.

1.2 b-solutions

b-solutions is a 2-year pilot initiative financed by the EU budget, managed by the *Association of European Border Regions*⁶ (AEBR) and promoted by the European Commission's DG REGIO as one of the actions proposed in the referred Communication *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions*.

The general objective of b-solutions is to identify and promote sustainable methods of resolving border obstacles of a legal and/or administrative nature along EU internal land borders.

Public authorities should seize the opportunity offered by b-solutions to test effective ways—in the form of pilot actions— of overcoming border obstacles of a legal and/or administrative nature along EU internal land borders (including also the neighbouring EFTA countries) that can be replicable in other contexts. Each of these pilot actions must focus on one of the topics highlighted in the Communication and accompanying *Staff Working Document*⁷, i.e. (1) employment, (2) health, (3) transport, (4) multi-lingualism and (5) institutional cooperation. Each of these projects (actions) will have the objective of exploring one specific solution for one specific problem in one specific border. Projects will be implemented during a maximum period of 15 months.

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/communications/2017/boosting-growth-and-cohesion-in-eu-border-regions

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/border-regions>

⁶ <http://www.aebr.eu/en/>

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http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/2014/boosting_growth/swd_boosting_border_en.pdf

These pilot projects are neither meant to solve problems associated with lack of infrastructures nor to be the source for significant investments in the border regions. Their main purpose is to address cases where interactions across the border are more difficult either because of lack of coherence of legislation⁸ applicable on the different sides of the border, or because of inconsistencies and overlapping of the different administrative procedures, or even because applicable legislation does not take into account the specificity of cross-border interactions. Thus, each action should allow for joining together the involved public bodies and stakeholders in order to foster, design and possibly agree on, a solution that would overcome the addressed legal or administrative obstacle. It might happen that the projects do not allow for the implementation of the solution (for example if it implies time-consuming development of technical components or lengthy legislative changes), and that the implementation would actually happen at a later stage (and funded by other means). In such cases, however, it is expected that the action will lead to a solid agreement by which the relevant public bodies commit to implement the chosen solution.

Projects to be supported shall be of good quality, designed and implemented with the involvement of key stakeholders, result-oriented and transferable.

To increase their **replicability**, and to facilitate that the solutions found can inspire other solutions to similar problems in other border regions, projects should foresee how to explore and disseminate and communicate the results achieved.

After the reporting phase of the pilot actions AEBR, in cooperation with the Commission services, will elaborate a consolidated report (compendium) illustrating main findings and proposals derived from the projects, and will also report on all cases identified. Lessons learned and policy recommendations for decision-makers are expected to be major outputs of the b-solutions initiative. That said, b-solutions is expected to provide with:

- Solutions addressing concrete legal and administrative obstacles, tested and based in case-studies, which should be replicable, made available and promoted to other border regions across Europe.
- Innovative proposals developed that can inform further development and implementation of future approaches by national/regional authorities and/or via EU instruments (particularly, but not exclusively, Interreg).
- Evidence of increased exchange of information and mutual engagement between the different levels of administration in border areas, and of joint initiatives involving multi-level governance across borders.
- Increased understanding of specific obstacles, and potential 'solutions', amongst key stakeholders at local/regional/national/EU level.

⁸ Legislation in here seen in a broader context, including all regulatory framework, regardless of its source or level, applicable in the field addressed by the project on that territory.

There are two levels of expected impact:

- Specific impact in relation to the concrete projects (due to overcoming an identified obstacle); and
- a broader impact on other areas that can be achieved if innovative approaches are developed that are truly replicable and can be effectively promoted and disseminated across the EU inspiring similar solutions to be implemented in other border regions. In addition, part of the impact will be a substantial increase in awareness of, and knowledge about, various legal/administrative obstacles to cross-border interactions.

The available budget for the grants announced in this call is € 400,000. Each project can receive a grant up to a maximum of € 20,000.

The present document sets out the requirement and process to follow in order to submit a proposal to be granted and it should be read in conjunction with the b-solutions "Guidelines" published on the b-solutions website⁹.

2. THEMATIC COVERAGE FOR THIS CALL FOR PROPOSALS

The Commission has decided to closely align the topics of the pilot projects to those defined in the framework of the Communication *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in European Border Regions*. For the present Call for Proposals, applicants can submit project proposals addressing the following topics: (1) employment, (2) health, (3) transport, (4) multi-lingualism and (5) institutional cooperation.

Public authorities applying in the framework of the b-solutions Call for Proposals are requested to select only one of the topics proposed. However, as an integrated approach should be developed in order to tackle effectively the challenges identified, in the Application Form applicants have the possibility to describe the links and spill-over effects with other topics and policy areas.

As stated, the Commission's desire is to see projects proposed that bring concrete, durable, effective and replicable solutions to address cross-border obstacles of a legal and/or administrative nature along EU internal land borders.

Please bear in mind that during the selection and implementation of pilot actions proposals, the complementarity and synergies with other Union funding programmes and policies, as well as supported projects, is of utmost importance, but this specific action should not be funded under any other EU scheme¹⁰. The b-solutions Selection Committee will seek to avoid any duplication when deciding which projects to support.

The following sections provide detailed descriptions for the 5 priority topics of the present Call for Proposals.

⁹ <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>

¹⁰ Here it must be underlined that the action is not necessarily the complete solution. No double funding of the action is allowed, but the action may lead to an agreement or convention which will unblock future investment. That future investment could be funded by any means.

2.1 Employment

Labour mobility is the most important area directly affected by border obstacles. This particularly concerns cross-border workers who live on one side of the border and travel to work on the other side of the border on a daily or weekly basis. A number of tools and coordination mechanisms exist at European level to facilitate cross-border work such as the *European Network of Employment Services (EURES)*, rules for the coordination of social security systems, the *European Qualifications Framework* which supports understanding and comparison of qualifications, the *Europass Framework* which enables individuals to communicate their skills and qualifications, the European classification of skills, competences, qualifications and occupations and the *European Professional Card*, an EU-wide digital procedure for the recognition of professional qualifications. A good practice example in Social Security is the *Social Security and Labour Inspection* of Galicia and that of North Portugal. They have created a network supported by the local EURES cross-border partnership, which allows a faster resolution of obstacles to cross-border mobility of employers and workers. There are other cross-border areas active in facing labour challenges such as the Upper Rhine (CH-DE-FR) or the Oresund Region (DK-SE).

Applicants are encouraged to find solutions to reinforce cooperation between public employment services in border regions including joint cross-border employment services to improve access to general information and to vacancies in the cross-border labour market. Other fields of action may be the recognition of diplomas and skills, the establishment of a new framework for cross-border apprenticeship, shared solutions to deal more effectively with taxation, social security and pension rights issues.

2.2 Health (including emergency services)

Encouraging cooperation between the Member States to improve complementarity of their health services in border regions is a priority for the EU. This means focusing not only on pure health care services but also on other health-related infrastructures and procedures. For instance, different structures and principles exist for the reimbursement of cross-border healthcare resulting in e.g. different and complex procedures for the prior authorisation of health services and payments/reimbursements; administrative burden for patients dealing with cross-border consultations with specialists; incompatibilities in the use of technology and in the sharing of patient data; and lack of unified accessible information, which also includes a lack of information in the patients' language. In addition, limited accessibility from both sides of the border often hampers the full use of the health care facility. Emergency and rescue services are also sometimes impeded in carrying out cross-border interventions.

There are some excellent examples of cooperation in this field (e.g. the ZOASTS on the Belgian-French border, or the Cerdanya Hospital on the French-Spanish border) but, as explained above, there are still many issues to solve in order to achieve a consolidated and fruitful cooperation which deliver better healthcare for border citizens, and a more efficient use of health facilities and other resources, in particular emergency services. Under this topic, applicants could come up with actions solving one specific obstacle related to access to health services in cross-border areas.

2.3 (Public) transport of passengers

Transport is a key enabler of exchanges between regions across national borders. Especially public transport services not only help integration processes but also enhance the sustainability of cross-border connectivity. Lacking, insufficient or low-quality public transport services are still a reality for many citizens in border regions. This concerns three levels: 1) infrastructure connections, 2) service provision, and 3) the quality of services.

Pilot actions under this topic should facilitate an improvement of the quality of public transport services, for instance touching upon activities such as the coordination of transport planning, transport pricing, integration of timetables, easy and multilingual access to information, joint smart ticketing across the specific border, etc.

2.4 Multi-lingualism

Multilingualism is a European integration goal. The ability to speak foreign languages is also increasingly important to boost employability, mobility and competitiveness, which is of particular relevance in border regions. Many examples of bilingualism projects are already available as a source of inspiration, such as the "France-strategy", which was adopted by the German region of Saarland in 2014 to promote a bilingual approach at all levels of administration. There are other interesting approaches in high multilingual areas, like the Alpine region, but also in previously divided areas, like German-Polish or German Czech border areas.

Pilot actions under this topic should look for solutions that could make a multilingual approach easier (e.g. mainstreaming bi-lingualism or life-long language learning) in the specific border region.

2.5 Institutional Cooperation

EU Member States have different administrative cultures and systems. This diversity can be a constraint when different systems meet. Most administrative procedures tend to be of a national nature and cross-border procedures are less widespread. However, border stakeholders may well require non-domestic procedures on a regular basis. The lack of common approach or understanding, and the limited existence of mutually recognised documents can lead to lengthy and costly procedures, even for key life events.

Actions under this topic can touch upon various fields of activity, for instance, looking at shared *e-government* solutions for specific cross-border needs that could facilitate the life of citizens of border areas. A very good and recent example has been provided by the *Benelux Agreement* on mutual recognition of higher education qualifications.

3. ELIGIBLE ORGANIZATIONS – WHO CAN APPLY?

Only eligible public bodies and cross-border structures can submit an Application Form in the framework of the b-solutions Call for Proposals. Eligible public bodies (national, regional, local) should have a national boundary limiting their territory and involve a co-applicant from the other side(s) of the same border, which territory should be contiguous to that of the lead applicant.

The concept of territory, as applied in this call for proposals, is not limited to the territory in which one entity is located. It covers the territory for which a given public institution or body has a mandate (meaning the legal competence to intervene in certain areas and territories).

There must be a minimum of two applicants for every pilot action proposed: a “lead applicant” and a co-applicant. The “lead applicant” must be a public body at the national, regional or local level. The co-applicant(s) must also be a public body at the national, regional or local level. At least one co-applicant must be an entity from the other side(s) of the border, a peer (meaning also a public institution or body, even if with a different governmental level) of the main applicant. There is no maximum limit to the number of applicants, though feasibility of the proposals should be taken into account when defining the consortia.

Cross-border entities such as *European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation* (EGTCs), *Euroregions*, *Eurodistricts*, *Eurocities* and similar cross-border structures with legal personality can also apply (even if they are not public bodies). If the applicant is a cross-border entity the above mentioned conditions (contiguity to the border; at least one partner from each side of the border; at least one public body from each side of the border(s)) must be met within its own structure. This is to say, the applicant cross-border entity must be composed by at least one public body from each side of the border and at least one member from each side of the border which territory is limited by the national border. If these conditions are met a co-applicant is not required.

Affiliated entities of other nature can also be included in applicants’ consortia, but only if it can be demonstrated that they are directly involved in the identified obstacle and that their engagement is vital to designing and implementing a solution (e.g. one hospital if the obstacle is the access to health infrastructure). A natural person cannot be, in any case, considered as an affiliated entity.

The following principles apply to all eligible applicants in the framework of the b-solutions Initiative:

- All applicants shall be located in an EU Member State (or neighbouring EFTA country) and their territories share at least one EU internal land border with another EU Member State/EFTA country.
- Only eligible public bodies (or cross-border structures) as “lead applicants” may submit an Application Form in the framework of the b-solutions Call for Proposals.
- Any applicant (lead applicant, co-applicant or affiliated entity) can be involved in only one pilot action proposal within the same thematic area in the framework of the present Call for Proposals .

During the eligibility check, in case any applicant's status as eligible candidate is uncertain, the AEBR will seek clarifications with all relevant partners to determine eligibility.

4. ONLINE APPLICATION FORM – HOW TO APPLY

The link to the online Application Form is: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/apply>

Please refer to the “Guidelines” document which contains detailed instructions on how to fill in the online Application Form.

The application process is 100% paperless through the use of the b-solutions website (<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>).

The application consists of an online Application Form. Annexes can also be uploaded and attached to the Application Form. These could be a map presenting the area of intervention, a graph, an infographic, etc. The type and size of the accepted files to be annexed are specified in the dedicated webpage.

All applicants must fill in the Application Form in clear English.

The final deadline for the submission of the Application Form and Confirmation sheet is 30/04/2018 14h00 CET.

5. BUDGET LINES, ELIGIBLE EXPENSES AND GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

Expenditure related to the implementation of the b-solutions projects shall be eligible according to the b-solutions “Guidelines” and budgeted in the appropriate budget lines.

Each project can receive a grant up to a maximum of € 20,000 paid in two instalments: a first payment amounting 40% of the total amount requested and approved for the grant after signature of the agreement; and a final payment amounting 60% of the total requested and approved after submission and approval of the final report, and a corresponding payment request.

The eligibility of expenditure in every grant will be limited to the following items:

- travel and accommodation costs and corresponding per diems;
- procurement of external services and expertise; and
- an overhead for indirect costs up to a maximum of 7% of the direct costs.

Expenditure related to the non-EU partners (neighbouring EFTA countries) is not eligible, even if it is paid by one of the EU partners (e.g. travel costs of staff of partner in EFTA paid by a partner in an EU country).

Expenditure with remuneration and related staff costs are not eligible.

The action cannot be simultaneously financed by other sources from the EU budget. Applications must include a declaration from applicants that the proposed action is not being financed under other schemes.

6. SELECTION PROCESS

Following submission, each application is subject to a selection process organised along the following steps:

1. Eligibility check
2. Assessment by a panel of external experts

Selection procedure in short:

- Application forms will be received in electronic format, confirmation of receipt will be sent to applicants and eligibility checks will be performed.
- An expert panel will be formed to perform quality assessments and rank the proposals. The experts will be geographically and gender balanced – they will all have a proven track-record of cross-border work (academic, legal, practical, etc.).
- AEBR will prepare an evaluation report to be submitted and discussed with the Commission, with a proposal of selected applications to be implemented. The final list of selected applications will be agreed with the European Commission.

6.1 Eligibility check

Upon closure of the Call, AEBR will carry out an eligibility check on all submitted project applications. The purpose of the eligibility check is to verify compliance of the received applications and their annexes with the formal eligibility criteria.

B-solutions ***general eligibility criteria*** are the following:

1. The Application Form has been submitted electronically via the dedicated webpage before the deadline indicated in the present Call for Proposals.
2. The Application Form is completely filled in English.
3. The applicants correspond to the applicant's profile detailed under section 3 of the present Call for Proposals.
4. Eligibility period is respected: the foreseen end date of the project respects the Call and the initiative requirements.
5. The maximum grant foreseen in the budget is respected.

B-solutions ***specific eligibility criteria*** are the following. The proposed action must

1. address a real and well documented obstacle of an administrative and/or legal nature;
2. be implemented in a cross-border manner, i.e. with the direct and effective involvement of the partners from the different sides of the border;
3. cooperate across one or more national boundary(ies) between countries identified in point 3 of this call (*Who can apply*);
4. be clearly within one of the 5 topics eligible under this call;

If any of the eligibility criteria set out above (general or specific) is not complied with, the application will be deemed ineligible and no further assessment will be undertaken.

Then, **criteria for the selection** of b-solutions pilot projects for sub-granting are:

1. The adequateness and feasibility of the proposal to tackle and effectively solve the addressed obstacle;
2. the partners' mandate to devise possible solutions for the identified obstacle, in particular how that mandate increases the feasibility of the proposed solution;
3. the replicability potential of the action in other European internal borders;
4. the contribution the proposed solution will make to cross-border interaction in any of the five eligible fields;
5. the general quality of the proposal;
6. the expected visibility of the European added value of cross-border cooperation and Cohesion Policy.

If all requirements set out above are not complied with, the application will be deemed ineligible and no further assessment will be undertaken.

6.2 Selection of the proposals to receive a grant

Applications that are declared eligible will be subject to an assessment carried out by a panel of External Experts.

The assessment will check the quality of the proposals.

A score of 1 to 5 will be attributed to each six criteria above which will result in an overall score per project proposal. The list of projects proposed to be attributed a grant will be established in the following way:

- The two proposals with the highest overall scores per each of the above-mentioned thematic areas will be selected, only if their score is at least above the threshold of 60% of the potential maximum score;
- The remaining proposals will be selected according to their overall scores (by diminishing order starting from the highest score), only if their score is at least above the threshold of 60% of the potential maximum score;
- Proposals will be included in the list of projects proposed to receive a grant until the limit of the maximum available budget;

After the assessment by the experts' panel, AEBR will submit an evaluation report (including the list of projects proposed to be attributed a grant) to the Commission services, which will make the final decision as to which projects are selected. The Commission may require AEBR and the panel of experts to further justify the scorings attributed to any of the proposals.

All applicants will be notified at the end of this process of the decision taken on their proposals.

7. PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

Project partners which fulfil the definition of a contracting authority according to the relevant national procurement legislation have to respect the applicable public procurement rules.

8. HOW TO GET ASSISTANCE

AEBR staff will be ready to assist applicants with any technical and procedural questions they may have during the Call for Proposals. Contact details can be found on the b-solutions website (<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>).

A set of FAQs is available online¹¹, which will be updated regularly with practical questions posed by applicants through the functional b-solutions mailbox (b-solutions@aebr.eu).

9. KEY DATES

- Publication and launch on 1 February 2018
- Call opening: 1 February 2018
- Call closing: 30 April 2018
- Selection of successful proposals: May-June 2018
- Contracting project beneficiaries and actual start of pilot actions: June-July 2018
- Implementation period: June 2018 – September 2019 (up to 15 months)
- Examination and analysis of pilot actions: 30 September – 30 November 2019
- Reporting: 30 November - 30 December 2019

¹¹ <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/info-kit>