

# To put cross-border cooperation back into the heart of the European project

(POLITICAL DECLARATION)

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The three most recent crises of the European Union – namely, the migration and security crisis in 2015, the COVID pandemic in 2020-2021, as well as the Russian invasion of sovereign Ukraine in 2022 – have fundamentally shaken and challenged the project of borderless Europe. Every crisis has impacted the system of European border regimes and the freedom of movement: several EU member states closed their borders against the migrants (some of them even erected new fences). Except for a few member states, the national governments' most important and heavily contested measure against the spread of the pandemic was the sealing of the borders. And the Russian aggression against Ukraine has returned territorial sovereignty into the centre of the European discourse, as the most salient symbol of territorial sovereignty is the state border.

In parallel with these crises, the proposal of a new mechanism enabling border communities to facilitate the elimination of legal and administrative obstacles (namely, the European Cross-Border Mechanism, ECBM) has been blocked by the Council because some member states considered it an erosion of their territorial sovereignty. On the other hand, the proposal of the Commission and the European Parliament on a mandatory ratio of the Recovery Fund to be spent for cooperation purposes was neglected by the member states. And even the mutual trust between traditionally strong allies within the EU has weakened.

For those involved in cross-border cooperation (CBC), it has always been clear that CBC has not ever been a marginal aspect of the European project but rather a key one: without the elimination of border obstacles to free movement, the European Union, a historically unique project of integration, peace building and prosperity loses its sense. Cross-border cooperation is the most important tool for creating common European citizenship and identity. Therefore, with a view to managing the impacts of crises, cross-border cooperation should be put back into the heart of the EU policies and public opinion.

In harmony with the Resolution of the European Committee of the Regions adopted in 2021 on the future of cross-border cooperation, the Report of the European Commission identifying border regions as living labs of European integration, and the Commission's proposal on strengthening the governance of the Schengen Area including the obligation of designation of privileged cross-border regions, AEBR (Association of European Border Regions), MOT (Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière) and CESCO (Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives) urge the Member States and the European institutions to take measures to protect and further develop the achievements of a borderless Europe. The three organisations are ready to increase and unite their efforts in an age of crises, following Jean Monnet who wrote in his Memoirs as early as 1978: "Europe is the sum of solutions adopted for these crises".

For internal and external EU borders, cross-border cooperation is a unique and ultimate way of conflict resolution and reconciliation, and as an alternative solution for overcoming territorial divergence and enhance inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic pointed out the necessity of solidarity by sharing medical capacities in human resources and equipment.

The war triggered by Russia shows that the EU must enhance its own security policy and be more active in terms of EUisation of CBC along the external borders. In addition, Brexit has created a new reality in the western territories hindering cross-border flows and cooperation.

Cooperation and partnership are also necessary for overcoming future crises, e.g. stemming from tackling climate change which again does not respect state borders.

**Accordingly, AEBR (Association of European Border Regions), MOT (Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière, French borders) and CESCO (Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives, Hungarian borders):**

- (1) call on the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council to protect the achievements of territorial cooperation and the freedom of movement within the EU through its regulative power;
- (2) support the objectives of the European Committee of the Regions set in the Resolution on the future of cross-border cooperation;
- (3) urge the EU Member States to return to the fundamental aims of the founders of a more integrated alliance of European nation-states where they overcome borders and solidarity overwrites the national egoism of the past;
- (4) invite local and regional actors involved in cross-border cooperation within and beyond the European Cross-Border Citizens' Alliance to lobby at the national level towards these common goals;
- (5) express their readiness to devote their human, technical and networking capacities to achieving the above objectives.

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