

Seminar on the role of the national level in cross-border cooperation

Benelux and the Budapest Platform held a seminar in Brussels on 2nd July on the role of national level in cross-border cooperation. The seminar – the first since the creation of the platform – was very successful. The participants had the opportunity to learn about the experiences of four countries and the point of view of the DG Regio, the Council of Europe and the Committee of the Regions.

The Budapest Platform was established in 2010 by the French Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT), the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands, the Portuguese Working Communities Galicia-Norte Portugal and Norte de Portugal / Castilla y León as well as the Hungarian Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives (CESCI) in Budapest. The main objectives of the platform are:

- to create a professional support network at European level;
- to share experiences acquired during their operation;
- to use these experiences for common benefit;
- to harmonize their professional activities;
- to realize common initiatives, professional programmes and projects;
- and, through the activities mentioned above, to develop in a complex way the border areas of the countries represented by those organizations.

Welcome address

At the beginning of the seminar **Mr Luc Willems**, Deputy Secretary-General of the Secretariat-General of the Benelux Union, greeted the participants and introduced the more than 50 years old Benelux cooperation.

Presentation of the Budapest Platform

Mr Jean Peyrony, the Director-General of the MOT presented the Budapest Platform and declared that it was a network open to new members.

Presentation of various experiences

During the seminar representatives of four different countries presented their experiences on the role of the national level in cross-border cooperation.

The Hungarian experience

Firstly the Hungarian example was introduced by **Mr Bence Rétvári**, Minister of State for Public Administration and Justice and **Mr Gyula Ocskay**, Secretary-General of CESCO. In the case of Hungary the above mentioned ministry plays the role of coordination using several tools such as intergovernmental joint committees, EGTC (European grouping of territorial cooperation) forum, EGTC fund and CESCO as professional strategic partner of the ministry. Within the ministry a department tackles the legal problems of border crossing. It might be the reason why the institutionalized cooperation is so popular and successful around Hungary.

The Dutch experience

Mr Tom Leeuwestein, head of unit at the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, explains that in his ministry, similarly to the Hungarian ministry, a unit has been dealing with cross-border issues since 2008. The main mission of the unit is to eliminate the obstacles hindering cross-border activities, but it does not deal with questions falling under the competence of the local level. In some cases an agent is delegated to the border area concerned.

The French experience

Mr Jean-Luc Frès, executive officer at the DATAR (Interministerial delegation for spatial planning and regional attractiveness) (France) explained that his organization is responsible for the coordination of spatial planning and regional policy at state level. DATAR wants to develop contacts with neighbouring states about cross-border cooperation: for instance, to coordinate Partnership Agreements on common borders, and to build sustainable cross-border data systems. He presented the well-known French association, the MOT, founded in 1997. Its mission is to facilitate cross-border cooperation around France in close collaboration with the national government and especially the DATAR. **Mr Jean Peyrony** (MOT) presented the study on the monitoring of territorial development in cross-border regions.

The German Experience

The German BBSR (Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development) is a research institution of the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Development. The main task of the institute is to provide a consultancy service to the federal government, to build databases, to carry out research programmes on the issues indicated in its name. **According to the recently modified German Spatial Planning Legislation (Raumordnungsgesetz, ROG § 25) the BBSR is obliged to maintain an information system on urban and regional development in Germany and adjacent (transborder) areas.** The institution carried out an investigation on cross-border functional regions, within the framework of the MORO project (Demonstration Project of Spatial Planning), and, based on the experiences and results gained from the project, the BBSR has launched IMEG, an initiative for cross-border metropolitan regions at European level, explained **Dr. Gerd Hager**, executive manager of the Middle Upper Rhine Region (Germany), representing IMEG.

Reactions from the European institutions

After the presentations, the representatives of the European institutions shared their comments on the preceding presentations.

Mr Colin Wolfe (DG Regio) welcomed the work of the Budapest Platform. For him, the language of planning is not enough present in the preparation of 2014/2020 programmes; it would help to tap the potential of cross-border regions. The territorial approach has to be explained at a political level. Within the framework of EU 2020, the Commission published country-specific recommendations for each Member State. They want Member States to think out of national and regional boxes. Member States are numerous (28!); functional areas, macro-regional approaches, ITI (integrated territorial investment) and EGTC notions, can contribute to organize “intermediate territories”. ETC (European territorial cooperation) will have a bigger role in 2014/2020. There is a need for a more strategic approach to cross-border regions, coherence between TEN-T (trans-European transport network) and TEN-E (trans-European energy network) connections, cooperation programmes and urban/rural planning in order to maximize the impact on, territorial development. During discussions with Member States, DG Regio will also take into consideration the cooperation aspects of partnership agreements and 300 operational programmes.

Mr Thomas Zandstra (Council of Europe - CoE) presented the activities of the Council of Europe. It has prepared a new legal tool, the Euroregional Co-operation Grouping (ECG), that all European countries can implement. The Council of Europe is now updating the cross-border cooperation guide in order to take into account the new challenges facing the local authorities and the States. CoE will organize a seminar on “Tools, methods and practices for transfrontier cooperation” in Gorizia and Nova Gorica on 18 and 19 October 2013.

Mr Alfonso Alcolea Martinez (Committee of the Regions - CoR) confirms the importance of multi-level governance and coordination of policies (internal and with neighbouring states) for cross-border cooperation; therefore he welcomes the interest of Member States, as they have a major role there. The new EGTC regulation will offer a better framework (tacit approval) and States have committed to facilitate EGTC process. Both top down strategies (national priorities for border areas) and bottom up approaches (involvement of civil society) are required. ITI and CLLD (community-led local development) offer new opportunities. CoR works on the contribution of cross-border integration to the Single Market (free movement of people, services etc.).

He welcomes cooperation of CoR with CoE, CPLRE (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities), as the same politicians are involved.

Debate

During the final section of the seminar the representatives of different member states (Slovenia, Poland, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Croatia) and the European institutions contributed to the debate moderated by **Mr Tom Leeuwestein**.

Asked by **Mr Tom Leeuwestein** about how Member States can better coordinate national legislations across borders, **Mr Colin Wolfe** answers that macro regions and EGTCs are part of the answer.

Mr Milan Vatovec, from Slovenian Permanent Representation, stressed the importance of a strategic approach at all levels.

Mr Fillip Chybalski, from the Polish Ministry of Regional Development, raised the need of coherent national legislations across borders; cohesion policy is not all: e.g. state aid rules are concerned.

Mr Vincent Moyse (Walloon region) explains that Wallonie Bruxelles International (WBI) is now in charge of both Interreg and cross-border cooperation.

Mr Jean Luc Frès underlined the need to mainstream ETC; the point is how to coordinate in concrete terms the operational programme (OP) governance, cross-capitalize ETC and other OPs.

Mr Jean-Claude Sinner, (Luxembourg) stressed the need to connect political cross-border strategies, on the one hand, and ETC programs, which are tools, on the other hand. He warned that the more topics are strategic and concern real life, the more they are difficult to deal with in a cross-border context.

Mr Jean Peyrony (MOT) wished that the 4 EU network programs take cross-border aspects into consideration: Interact of course (need to work more in interaction with national level), but also Espon (cross-border data systems etc.), Urbact (cross-border urban systems, EGTC as governance tool) and Interreg C (cross-border thematic aspects).

Conclusions

The common topics of the seminar were the following:

1. A *multi-level approach* is needed in the case of cross-border cooperation. The local level is able to discern the real needs of daily life but the obstacles between the states can be moved away only through the intervention of the national level.
2. An *integrated strategic approach* should boost the classical project-based approach in border areas. It can guarantee the long-term sustainability of the results and a better use of territorial capital of the particular region. Thus each border territory should elaborate and realize its own integrated territorial strategy. The funding of the realization of said strategies requires the involvement of the national level and stable governance structures guaranteeing the proper use of funds on both sides of the border.
3. The integrated strategies should be based on *local cross-border data (cross-border flows etc.)* which are not available at the moment. As the project of the MOT focusing on the monitoring of border regions demonstrates, there is a necessity for creating a platform facilitating spatial planning in border regions. The incompatibilities of national level databases need to be eliminated, which requires the active participation of national level institutions.
4. Border territories face *specific problems* caused mainly by differences between legal systems. The Budapest Platform aims to reduce the frequency of such problems, which occur at local level but can only be resolved at state level, through a coordination between neighbouring states.

The main messages of the seminar:

- The monitoring project, aiming to build common evidence and vision in cross-border territories should be extended to the entire territory of the European Union (professional level).
- There is a need for a more harmonized strategic and legal framework for cooperation (political level).
- The Budapest Platform aims to provide responses to both messages. It is opened to other countries, and wishes to contribute to the political agenda in the field of territorial cohesion (Territorial Agenda).

For more information about the Budapest Platform

<http://budapestplatform.eu/>