

Cross-border Institutional Trust in Post-pandemic Times. The Role of EU *b-solutions* Initiative.

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Abstract

Mutual trust is an important element in starting cross-border processes, and institutional trust is vital to forging sound and effective cross-border cooperation. It is widely debated that the recent covidfencing process in Europe chipped away existing long and medium-term cross-border institutional ties, in most European borders, at least for some time. The fundamental point is that the sudden closing of national borders also revealed how important are effective and well-functioning cross-border institutions to direct the reopening of such borders into functional cross-border areas. To appreciate more in-depth the importance of cross-border institutional trust in post-pandemic times, this article analyses to what extent the EU *b-solutions* initiative contributes to reinforcing it along European cross-border regions. The analysis concluded that this EU initiative reinforces cross-border institutional trust by enhancing institutional capacity building, institutional knowledge sharing and stability/credibility as well as territorial integration in EU border regions. However, only a few European cross-border regions have benefited the most from this institutional support by *b-solutions*: the Benelux, plus Germany and France, as well as the Iberian cross-border areas.

Keywords: Institutional Trust, EU *b-solutions*, Institutional Cooperation, Cross-Border Cooperation, Covidfencing.

1. Introduction

There are no functioning societies without trust (Misztal, 1996). Policies are heavily conditioned by institutional trust, which facilitates the establishment of democratic institutions (Jacob and Schenke, 2020). Also, a wide body of literature concludes that entities perform better when they are trusted by their citizens (Esau, 2016). On a broader level, Liedong et al. (2015) claim that trust between institutions entails three main dimensions. Firstly, it requires the 'ability/skills' to foment knowledge

of policy processes and dynamics and in-depth knowledge of policy issues. Secondly, it entails ‘benevolence’ by acting in good faith and altruism. Thirdly, it involves ‘integrity’, by adherence to rules and principles, as well as honesty, predictability, legitimacy and credibility. Instead, for Pavlou (2002), institution-based trust is sustained not only by benevolence, credibility and familiarity, but also by perceived monitoring, accreditation, legal bonds, feedback and norms. Ultimately, expected trusting outcomes should be measured by the degree of satisfaction, perceived risk and continuity.

Institutional trust is a complex multi-dimensional process. It is nonetheless shrouded by key aspects such as reputation, behaviour and information sharing when it engages in cross-border (CB) collaboration (Chen et al., 2022). In Europe, for instance, recent attempts to analyse CB institutional mapping have revealed “complex intertwined institutional dynamics throughout the multi-level communications“ (Chilla and Lambracht, 2022: 14), involving all territorial government levels and actors, including CB entities. As González-Gómez and Gualda (2020) claim, cross-border cooperation (CBC) is largely forged by institutional networking through institutional structures and agreements. Hence, Euroregions, EGTCs and Eurocities (Medeiros, 2021) have a crucial role as pillars of CB institutional trust. These CB European bodies, however, rely, in large measure, on EU funding for their effective functioning (Medeiros, 2018). In this regard, the EU *b-solutions* initiative, implemented since 2018 by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) on behalf of the European Commission’s Directorate General for Urban and Regional Policy (DG REGIO) and aiming at identifying legal-administrative CB obstacles and proposing possible solutions (Medeiros et al., 2022), can be viewed as a concrete pro-active policy tool to boost CB institutional trust by heightening institutional cooperation across EU CB regions.

In this research we propose to analyse the potential positive contribution of the EU *b-solutions* initiative to foster institutional cooperation and consequently institutional trust in European CB regions in the following analytical dimensions: (i) improved CB institutional capacity building; (ii) improved institutional knowledge sharing; (iii) improved institutional stability/credibility of CB entities; and (iv) improved CB territorial integration. Hence, we seek to connect different theories and proposals dealing with institutional trust and, specifically, CB institutional trust, with the experience of *b-solutions* understood as a catalyst for institutional CBC. According to the experience accumulated by the AEBR since the seventies, the consolidation of CBC structures (mostly composed of local authorities from both sides of the border) and the development of CBC programmes already means important doses of institutional trust. The identification of obstacles to better cooperating with the neighbours and the expectations of their contribution and further coordination means substantial additional doses. In all these processes, relevant negotiations take place between different stakeholders at different levels and across borders, political agendas and local budgets are confronted

and coordinated, and agreements are achieved to constitute a CB structure, develop a CB programme or strategy, implement CB projects, apply to *b-solutions* or to any of the growing number of calls for CB pilot actions on a variety of matters.

How idealistic this view is, or how innovative, only time, a case-by-case analysis and a further meta-analysis across all cases will tell. During interviews with AEBR officials dealing directly with *b-solutions* stakeholders and potential ones, trust seems to be inherent to the motivation to apply and, accordingly, the lack of trust seems to be the main reason for not applying to *b-solutions*, even when obvious obstacles are hampering cooperation, undermining optimal access to public services, etc. There are many cases which have explicitly referred to the need to increase trust to remove obstacles in order to progress to more sophisticated cooperation in very dynamic cross-border territories, e.g. due to the amount of CB commuters (Jacquey, 2019; Lago, 2019).

Furthermore, in a survey launched in the spring of 2022 by AEBR among the 90 *b-solutions 1.0* cases, most respondents were satisfied with the exercise, but only two-thirds had started the process to implement the proposed solution, and half of them expressed the incapacity of their organisations to implement the proposed recommendations. In some cases, it had to do with complicated procedures at the national level (in both states) and/or asymmetric regulations involving too many authorities, but very often, the main obstacle laid in the lack of political will to implement the solution by the competent authority. Our paper also complements individual case-study reports on CB institutional trust (Golunov and Smirnova, 2021; van der Velde et al., 2021), in a line open by previous works based on studying databases composed by several CB areas (Chilla and Lambracht, 2022; Kaucic and Sohn, 2021; Medeiros et al., 2021a; Durà et al., 2018).

Methodologically, the analysis draws mostly from the deep scrutinization of the implemented EU *b-solutions* cases to identify the presence and development of institutional trust amongst involved stakeholders, and additional desk research, including a literature review mostly from border and institutional trust-related studies. The analysis of the implementation of the EU *b-solutions* included reading the expert's final report of each case analysed in the first phase of the project, and the reports on the implementation of this Initiative published by the European Commission, as well as a detailed analysis of the location and main goals of each case provided by the AEBR. The empirical analysis covers Europe and embraces 90 EU *b-solution* cases (see Annex), aiming at mitigating CB legal and administrative border obstacles all along EU internal borders. In its second phase, *b-solutions 2.0* also addresses the EU borders with pre-accession countries. For this specific paper, we have made a new revision of the first series of 90 cases and, besides those 33 initially categorised as 'institutional cooperation', where institutional trust plays an evident role (except for three cases), we have added 11 cases with notorious institutional implications (despite being included in other categories). The

final number of cases employed for this research is 41, as 3 of the previous 33 have finally not been included in the analysis (see Annex). Although the four elements of CB institutional trust usually are interrelated (see Fig. 2 in section 3), due to analytical purposes, the 41 cases are examined in section 4 by highlighting just one of these four elements. It has to be pointed out that “trust”, as already mentioned, is inherent and a major driver of CBC processes, and has been used as an analytical lens applied to study these 41 cases. Hence, it is not a term that has to be necessarily mentioned in the reports as “it goes without saying”, according to AEBR Team.

The article starts by setting out a short introduction of the EU *b-solutions* initiative soon followed by a state-of-the-art panorama of institutional trust in European CB areas in post-pandemic times. It then highlights some of the key lessons learned with the implementation of the EU *b-solutions* towards institutional CB trust. The next section presents a set of policy recommendations for increased CB institutional trust. Theoretical and policy implications are discussed in the conclusions.

2. EU b-solutions in a nutshell

Managed by the AEBR on behalf of DG REGIO, the EU *b-solutions* initiative is one of the actions recommended in the Communication “Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions”, adopted by the European Commission on 20 September 2017 (EC, 2017). By now (early 2024), 166 cases have been selected. Most of them are already analysed and a report has been produced for each case. During the first phase (2018-2021) of *b-solutions*, AEBR received final reports from 10 pilot actions developed in an initial step and selected and contracted experts for 80 advice cases analysed afterwards. This is also the procedure utilised to analyse the expected additional hundred advice cases by September 2024 within the current *b-solutions 2.0*. Every expert provides legal consultation to define and document the assigned obstacle, making clear references to the legal provisions causing the obstacle and proposing one or various possible solutions¹. Most reports are 20-60 pages long, but

¹ We have used the studies corresponding to all selected cases under the first four *b-solutions* calls for proposals. As a result of the first call, only 10 pilot actions were selected by a panel of experts in legal and administrative CB matters. These experts had been selected according to their specialisation by the Commission and AEBR. The pilot actions were implemented for 15 months and delivered 10 final reports (first set of case studies). They also provided very fruitful information to better shape further calls and modify the approach, focussing on the need to support local stakeholders in defining the nature of the obstacles and possible solutions. To this end, every case selected through the following calls was assigned an expert who would guide the analysis and produce a report. The second set of studies was composed of the experts’ reports from 33 advice cases selected under the second call for proposals, 23 from the third and 24 from the fourth to fulfil the total 90 *b-solutions 1.0* cases. The selection of cases, as well as the selection and matching of experts, followed specific criteria and a thorough methodology, which is described in detail in the first chapter of the first *b-solutions* compendium (AEBR & EC, 2020a). To have a sufficient pool, there is an open call for experts on the project’s dedicated website, which remains open when closing the edition of this text.

some include thorough documentation as annexes. The obstacles were classified according to the eight thematic areas addressed by the European Commission in its aforementioned communication (see Table 1).

Table 1. EU *b-solutions* 90 cases selected and analysed within 8 thematic areas (identified in EC, 2017), in the four calls.

Thematic Areas	Calls				Total
	I	II	III	IV	
1. Institutional Cooperation	4	12	8	9	33
2. Employment	3	6	5	8	22
3. Health (incl. emergency services)	1	6	4	6	17
4. Public) transport of passengers	1	7	2	1	11
5. Multi-lingualism	1	1	1	0	3
6. Evidence and data	0	0	2	0	2
7. e-Government	0	1	0	0	1
8. Information services	0	0	1	0	1
Total	10	33	23	24	90

Source: own elaboration based on AEBR *b-solutions* database.

The summaries of these studies have been published in two compendiums (AEBR & EC, 2020b and 2021). It might be relevant to note that the word “trust” is mentioned very often when explaining and referring to the *b-solutions* initiative in general. The presentation of the first compendium stresses very much the need to build trust to achieve genuine CBC, but it has been very rare to find that word in the reports of the cases corresponding to the first phase. However, as already explained, it can be considered that it is implicit in many of them, particularly in those focused on deepening institutional cooperation. Actually, 33 (37%) out of the first 90 cases are directly related to mitigating legal-administrative barriers via institutional cooperation processes (Table 1). They are mostly located on the Iberian, Benelux and German-French borders (Fig. 1).

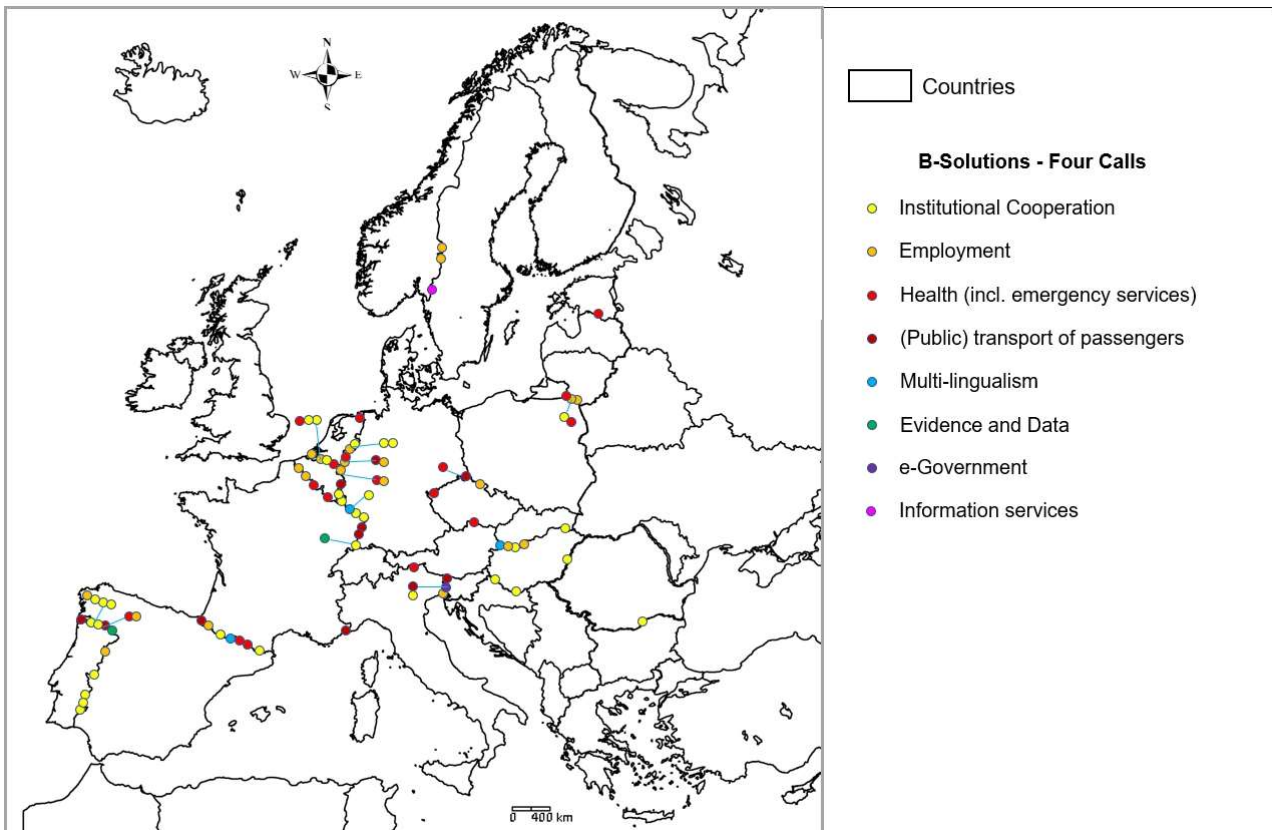


Figure 1. Precise location of the 90 EU *b-solutions* approved cases per category in the first four calls. Source: Own elaboration.

But it is also true that most cases (if not all of them) show, to a greater or lesser extent, the importance of institutional cooperation across borders, with a relevant trust component, to achieve successful CBC and, particularly, to solve legal and administrative hindrances in a growingly complex set of cross-border situations. Take the essential circumstance for cooperation of investing public money from a municipality in country A into an action in neighbouring country B. As a matter of fact, the whole (traditional) administrative machinery would consider this anathema. Still, there are very good examples in most European borders during the last decades showing the added value of these investments for both sides and even for both countries. According to a recent study carried out by the research services of the European Parliament, “adopting a new legislative instrument at EU level solving cross-border legal and administrative obstacles could bring economic benefits of EUR 123 billion per year within the EU and have a positive social impact on border regions” (EP, 2023b).

Despite long long-lasting impact of CBC during many years in a growing number of borders (not only in Europe), there seems to be a lot to do to make this visible and understandable for non-border institutions and citizens, according to the general awareness about CBC showed in the only

Eurobarometer addressing CBC in the EU, when 68% of the respondents were not aware of EU funded CB activities in their region and only 12% could identify them² (EC, 2015), and the relevance of CBC for mass media outside CB territories when it is not about a “hot” border and the variety of media approaches (González de Bustamante, 2017) or a catastrophe³. *b-solutions* is contributing very actively in collecting and analysing many cases all over Europe, making them visible and replicable while providing arguments to implement more stable instruments, but also pieces of evidence about the need for CBC and its added value.

3. Cross-border Institutional trust in a post-Covid 19 context

An embracing definition of institutional trust can refer to “people’s expectations of how institutions should treat people and what institutions should deliver based on the definition of the objectives and the principles according to which institutions are expected to function” (Devon et al., 2015: 87). However, measuring this process entails a serious challenge. As noted by Welter et al. (2008: 1) when referring specifically to a business context, trust is understood as a “perception of the probability that other agents will behave in a way that is expected”. If we focus on CB areas, trust appears to be even more relevant, due to the particular risks and costs associated to CB transactions and border crossings (Welter et al., 2008).

For Meyer (2022), three potential underlying aspects shape the development of CB trust: (i) the role played by pre-existing structures of ideological, interpersonal and CB institutional trust; (ii) practices of trust-building maintained by various actors towards rebuilding CB trust; and (iii) growing discourses of mistrust vs distrust in certain policy domains. In a complementary manner, Durand and Decoville (2020) highlight two relevant CB trust dimensions: (i) ideational – referring to the level of mutual social trust between border populations; and (ii) the institutional – referring to the involvement of stakeholders in cross-border cooperation (CBC) projects. The prevailing vision in which effective CBC networking is positively correlated with the building of ‘trust’ between stakeholders (Koch, 2018) requires, however, a sense of institutional flexibility (Hansen and Serin, 2010).

In CBC contexts, Koch (2018:) identifies four different forms of trust, which reveal and interlink the ambivalence of CBC practices: (i) social-cultural trust affected by different languages and working methods; (ii) rational-personal decision to trust and participate in cooperation; (iii) the historical-institutional trust depending on the path-dependent development of cooperation activities

² These data are quite old, and much has happened since then, but this is the only available evidence on CBC awareness through a wide European survey

³ Just look at any national newspaper or TV news. Any news from a border would most probably have to do with a conflict, crisis, natural hazard, etc.

and foreign policies; and (iv) general-personal trust based on relations that are influenced by experiences of trustworthiness and familiarity. Instead, Durand and Decoville (2019: 10) highlight dual levels in European cross-border regions when regard to the levels of mutual social trust, where European long-term pacified territories (e.g., Scandinavia) show high levels of trust between populations, “whereas mistrust is more prevalent in regions that conflicts during the 20th century have torn apart”. But as Meyer (2022) reveals, even within Scandinavian countries institutional trust-building has been a complex and ever-evolving process over the past decades.

As expected, the discussion of such a broad concept as institutional trust embraces a wide set of topics in existing literature. One of them relates to the notion of CB resilience (Andersen & Prokkola, 2022), in which CBC development policies should consider “at the same level their capability to promote a viable economy and the attractiveness of the region, where inhabitants and visitors are able to enjoy resilient connections and accesses between housing, services, natural and cultural assets on a sustainable way” (Castanho et al., 2017). Often regarded the “ability of regions to reconfigure their socio-economic and institutional structures to develop new growth paths” (Boschma, 2015: 734), regional resilience at the CB level requires CB sound, effective, stable, and credible trust processes.

In the past 30 years, following the implementation of the EU Interreg Community Initiative, the relevance of institutional trust to consolidate territorial and, in particular, CBC institutional processes, is commonly mentioned to be a crucial factor in solidifying CB institutional partnerships (Medeiros, 2014). However, we should remember how weak and ephemeral institutional trust could be when it usually depends on individuals leading CBC practices. Moreover, it is a general trend to face continuous modifications in the leadership of Interreg programmes, as well as in technical teams and local and regional representatives. This could entail different ways of approaching CBC, which may lead to a halt in cooperation. Hence, the importance of stable CBC structures such as Euroregions, Eurodistricts, Eurocities and, particularly, EGTCs, showing not only institutional trust but also commitment. It should be also mentioned that another aspect which has also helped consolidate CBC in Europe is the availability of multiannual cooperation programmes since the nineties (Interreg). This multiannual character, with many projects running across different political mandates, has helped enormously the “normalisation” of CBC for many local and regional authorities in border territories.

In this line of thought, this paper aims to reflect on the specific relevance of CB institutional trust to boost or hinder CBC. This is the challenge we propose to discuss in this paper, which launches the hypothesis that EU *b-solutions* plays a vital role in reinforcing CB institutional trust, in a broader lens, in European CB regions, by stimulating: a) CB institutional capacity building; b) institutional

knowledge sharing; c) institutional stability/credibility of CB entities; and d) CB territorial integration (Figure 2). The basic point is that these analytical dimensions were greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Medeiros et al., 2021b) and have to recover in very adverse circumstances. Guillermo-Ramírez (2020: 119) already highlighted that “the COVID-19 pandemic and European coordination gaps have to be added to previously existing difficulties, such as the growing climate-related and demographic challenges, and the wave of Euroscepticism, nationalism and populism”. Since the pandemic’s border closings, showing the weakness of the achievements after more than half a century of CBC in our continent, we have to add the current conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East and the wave of war-mongering. Unfortunately, “security” appears more frequently in headlines than “cooperation”.

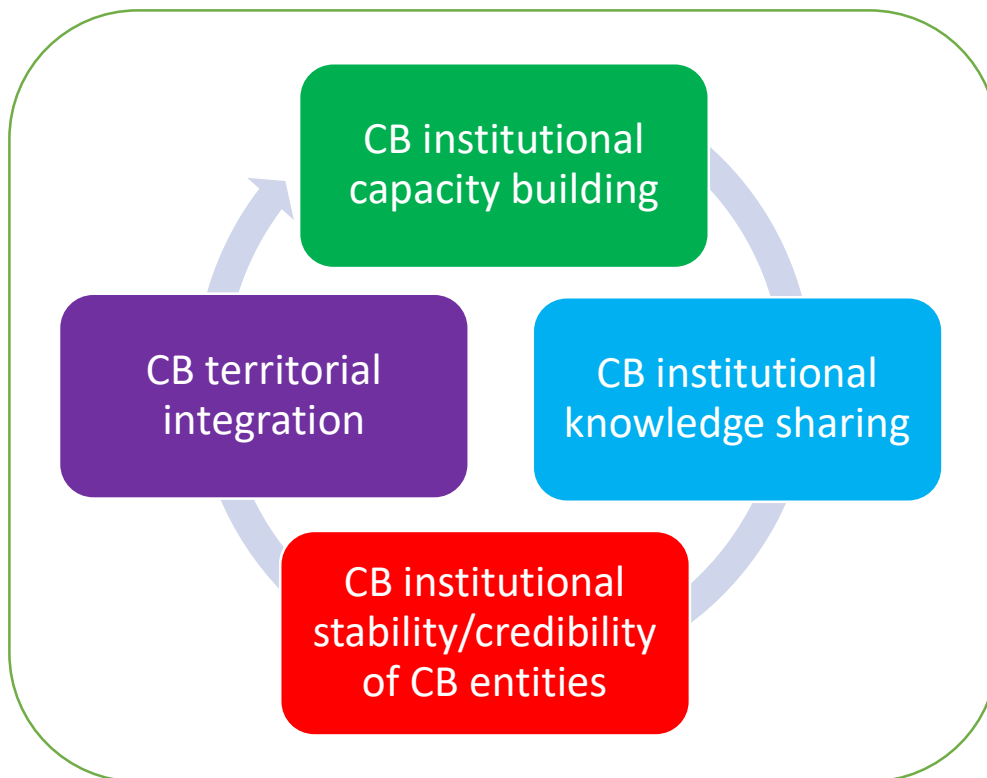


Figure 2. Main components of cross-border institutional trust. Source: own elaboration.

- a) CB institutional capacity building: The United Nations defines capacity-building as “the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world” (UN, 2023). In this regard, EU *b-solutions*, through the analyses of obstacles to cooperation and the proposal of feasible solutions, can stimulate CB institutional capacity building (Polverani et al., 2022) via its contribution to the acquisition of new competences

and know-how associated with institutional cooperation processes. Moreover, notwithstanding its limited scope, this EU initiative can promote a stronger participation of citizens in cooperation, e.g. inspiring people-to-people projects, as a means to attract citizens and local active CB stakeholders, as key institutional CB players. An Interact report (2020: 12) clearly stated that “people-to-people projects’ usually refer to small projects that bring citizens together – typically, such actions address children, culture, language, and sports. The main objectives are getting to know each other and enhancing trust-building”. By being, in a multitude of cases, a key support for CB projects throughout Europe, the EU *b-solutions* might have had a crucial role in rebuilding CB institutional trust between public and private actors in covidfencing times (Medeiros et al, 2022). Secondly, if successful, these cases might support the implementation of strategic CB planning, as a result of a systematic dismantling of CB legal-administrative obstacles and consequent increase of ‘institutional trust levels’.

- b) CB institutional knowledge sharing: For Haesebrouck et al. (2021: 14) knowledge sharing plays a paramount role in enhancing the efficacy of implicit, trust-based incentives. In turn, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) understands knowledge sharing as “a co-created and sustained process between countries or organisations, from any stage of development and background” (OECD, 2015: 20) which should include one or more of the following elements: (i) new content or substance: gained through mutual learning and collaborative innovation; (ii) new processes: including current forms of policy dialogues with knowledge sharing relevant processes, as well as the longer term institutionalisation of knowledge sharing in organisations; and (iii) new partnerships: new collaborative and trust-building relations, including complementary knowledge partners, possibly following joint standards. In this regard, the EU *b-solutions* can be regarded as an eloquent example of CB knowledge sharing in which CB entities address common solutions to mitigating persisting CB legal and administrative barriers in the EU. The current 2021-27 EU Cohesion Policy framework facilitates ‘cooperation governance’ —particularly in territorial cooperation through the Interreg specific objective 1 (the so called ISO 1) included in article 14 of the Interreg Regulation: “A better Cooperation governance”— to enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities, resolve legal and administrative obstacles in border regions, promote sustainable democracy, and strengthen mutual trust among citizens (EU, 2021) which can be linked to the policy goal of underpinning ‘institutional trust’. The activities suggested in Article 14, draft ETC regulation (Interact, 2020: 6) for the Interreg-A are literally as follows: (i) enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities, in particular those mandated to manage a specific territory, and of stakeholders; (ii) enhance efficient

public administration by promoting legal and administrative cooperation, and cooperation between citizens, civil society actors and institutions, in particular, with a view to resolving legal and other obstacles in border regions; and (iii) build up mutual trust, in particular by encouraging people-to-people actions.

- c) CB institutional stability/credibility of CB entities: The EU *b-solutions* can foster institutional stability/credibility of CB entities by supporting institutional cooperation-related projects led by European CB entities (Lange and Pires, 2018; Durà et al., 2018), which include Euroregions (Medeiros, 2011), European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) (Evrard and Engl, 2018) and border cities (Jurado-Almonte et al., 2020; Medeiros, 2021; Trillo-Santamaría et al., 2021), among others. Ultimately, this CB institutional stability/credibility requires, in our view, the implementation of CB planning strategies (Durand and Decoville, 2018; Medeiros, 2014) as a longer-term institutional arrangement to build up further CB institutional trust (Esau, 2016).
- d) CB territorial integration: European territorial integration is achieved via systematic mitigation of persisting CB barriers in the European territory (Medeiros, 2021b). As the Border Regions Communication (EC, 2017) and the subsequent Report (EC, 2021) have shown, legal and administrative CB barriers are seen by European border citizens as the ones that directly and indirectly affect their lives the most. Within a pandemic context, nation-states have tended to close their borders, which may have entailed a loss of CB institutional trust among local and regional stakeholders and border people (Golunov and Smirnova, 2021). The covidfencing processes led to examples of spatial and social injustice, and also avoidable institutional tensions (Casaglia, 2021), often buoyed by local and regional administrations (van der Velde et al., 2021). Conversely, CB entities and commuters have reacted to these covidfencing effects and engaged in specific initiatives to call for the reopening of the nation-state boundaries and the recuperation of preceding levels of CB institutional trust (Medeiros et al., 2021a; MOT, 2020). In this regard, a reduced level of institutional trust in a specific CB region is foreseen as a barrier to cooperation (Medeiros, 2011), alongside other possible obstacles, such as those related to the economy, the environment, the sociocultural context or the impediments to mobility and accessibility (Medeiros, 2018b). Ultimately, European territorial integration is achieved by mitigating all types of existing CB obstacles. Hence, the EU *b-solutions* can contribute to boosting institutional trust in a political mild post-covidfencing context by mitigating legal-administrative barriers, based on our proposed concept in which CB territorial integration is a key driver of CB institutional trust (Medeiros, 2021b).

4. Lessons learned with the implementation of *b-solutions* towards fostering institutional trust

4.1. Stimulating CB institutional capacity building

Some *b-solutions* cases show the lack of capacity to develop solutions to legal and administrative obstacles faced by stakeholders due to the complexity inherent to these barriers across borders. Hence, they are not able to define and propose a solution to a specific problem arising from a given cross-border project. As an example, various local travel agencies in the *QuattroPole e.V.* network of cities (French-German-Luxemburg border) warned that the implementation of an EU Directive⁴ concerning package travel (and linked travel arrangements) into three national frameworks created a new obstacle. However, after analysis of the new laws regulating travel packages in the three countries, the experts advising this case found that they are almost identical and there is no legal conflict. Therefore, the suggested solution to improve CB tourism included support to stakeholders in understanding the actual legal framework for cooperation. Similarly, emergency teams in the Lithuanian-Polish CB area cannot work together despite the existence of a legal framework (a 2000 bilateral agreement for mutual support and a 2005 methodological instruction) because this is unknown by the relevant stakeholders at the local level. On the other hand, this framework was not adapted to their current European situation once both countries entered the Schengen Area in 2007. *B-solutions* has helped to clarify the situation, raise awareness in the competent authorities and relevant stakeholders, and elaborate a possible and feasible solution. In another case submitted by the Province of Pontevedra (Spain), there are diverging standards and procedures for recycling electronic equipment and components in Spain and Portugal, and there are no unified criteria for e-waste. But the expert advising this case reported that various EU Directives in force^{5, 6, 7} facilitate these CB operations. This is also the case for the mobility of minors across borders. EU General Data Protection Regulation⁸ contains enough provisions in this regard, but the lack of communication and

⁴ Directive (EU) 2015/2302 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 November 2015 on package travel and linked travel arrangements, amending Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 and Directive 2011/83/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Council Directive 90/314/EEC

⁵ Directive 2008/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 November 2008 on waste and repealing certain Directives (Waste Framework Directive)

⁶ Directive 2014/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on public procurement and repealing Directive 2004/18/EC Text with EEA relevance

⁷ Directive 2006/123/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2006 on services in the internal market

⁸ Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation)

coordination between the relevant actors on multiple levels shows a gap between the authorising bodies and the operational organisations, as a case submitted by the municipality of Elvas (Portugal) eloquently illustrates.

As these examples show, in order to develop long-term shared solutions to overcome CBC problems local – but also regional and national – policymakers have to maintain a strong political will to be aware of the obstacles faced by border citizens and react in coordination with their peers across the border, and this requires important doses of trust. The experience with *b-solutions* cases clearly proves how important the involvement of politicians and policymakers at different level is. Particularly, national authorities are key actors when requiring modifications of the legal and administrative framework to implement CBC projects, no matter the scale or scope of the initiative. A good example is the case of the project led by the French Riviera Chamber of Commerce to connect municipalities in Italy and France through a maritime public transport system; without the active support at the French national level the measure could not be developed, as an amendment of French national law is required.

The *b-solutions* cases reveal that supporting local and regional stakeholders' capacities would be essential for these stakeholders to play a stronger role to identify and suggest solutions to CB obstacles under the recently proposed facilitation tool for cross-border solutions and cross-border coordination points, which are “back on stage” with a renewed format (EC, 2023), but still have to be backed by the co-legislators (the Parliament and the Council)⁹. The pilot action implemented by the EGTC Eurodistrict PAMINA identified how important the appropriate training on the circumstances, rights and specific procedures for CB workers at the Franco-German border is for the staff of health insurance funds and healthcare personnel. Even when bilateral agreements are achieved, it is crucial to guarantee that clear information is provided to all involved stakeholders and beneficiaries. This has also been illustrated by the pilot action implemented by the Pannon EGTC at the Hungarian-Croatian border to enhance CB selling of agro-food products at local farmers' markets.

⁹ When preparing the Compendium related to the first two *b-solutions* calls in 2019), the negotiations to adopt the so-called European Cross-Border Mechanism (ECBM) were progressing quite well, with a general feeling of an imminent approval. The instrument was considered to be within reach. However, at the end of 2020, the European Council decided to abandon it for the time being. Nevertheless, the expectations raised within the “CBC family” and the evidence shown about its appropriateness in many cross-border cases: roughly one in three reports from *b-solutions* cases points at such a tool as one of the best option to overcome the cross-border obstacle under study, but there are also important arguments in the literature (Engl & Evrad, 2019) led us to think that it would be back on the agenda, probably in a more simplified format and with a different name. A strong lobby was deployed and, in April 2023, the COTER Committee at the European Parliament started a process ending with a Resolution of the Parliament on 14 September 2023 asking the Commission for retaking the dossier, amending the proposal, simplifying it and re-starting negotiations with the Council to “rescue” this tool with a more attractive format for Member States (EP, 2023a). On 12 December, the Commission presented an amended proposal responding to the request of the Parliament but also to the Member States' concerns, though insisting on the need to respond to the obstacles affecting cross-border regions which cannot be solved with the current financing and legal instruments available at EU level (EC, 2023).

The expert advising the case submitted by the Vilkaviskis district in Lithuania recommended the design of an Interreg project to increase the capacities and equipment of their and their Polish neighbour's rescue services in CB circumstances.

Last but not least, when talking about capacities, language skills play an extraordinary role in many CB regions, as the case of the Austrian regions Lower Austria and Burgenland with their Hungarian and Slovakian neighbours illustrates. They are promoting CB schooling, and they are strongly committed to improving continuous language learning (and teaching) across their borders. The experts advising the case submitted by the EGTC Mura (HU-HR) have recommended a systematic process of awareness for local and regional authorities about the current situation and needed changes to facilitate authorisation processes in the neighbour's language for river tourism activities on the Mura River. In all cases, trust is notoriously involved in building capacities and networks to develop fruitful relationships and negotiations between different groups of stakeholders (public, private, civil society, Academia), various levels of governance (local-regional-national-European) and across borders.

4.2. Promoting CB institutional knowledge sharing

As the EU *b-solutions* cases show, the first stage to offer a solid and feasible solution stands in the knowledge of the complexity of the challenges. For this, research and evidence-based analysis of the obstacle is required. As a case in point, in the Advice Case presented by the municipalities of Verín and Chaves (ES-PT), the detailed analysis of the expert advising this case presented a roadmap including step-by-step actions to be implemented in order to build a regular transport service between these paired cities. Thanks to this work, the intricacy of overlapping competences of the different authorities involved was clarified. Other examples can also be recorded: the expert assigned to the case submitted by the EUCOR EGTC *European Campus* (DE-CH-FR) found how to provide more legal certainty for the taxation aspects in the provision of staff for this triple border academic institution; he did so by in-depth analysing the national provisions involved and the applicable EU legislation. Also, the River Minho EGTC has spotted the lack of awareness on both sides of the ES-PT border about the risks of missing common procedures regarding natural protection.

Stakeholders need informed analyses from both sides and evidence-based approaches to develop joint solutions for shared border obstacles. Exchanging information among them and coordinating with the competent authorities was found to be a fundamental step in successfully overcoming these obstacles, and it seems to be an excellent way of promoting mutual trust. For example, the Province of Limburg (NL) produced factsheets and roadmaps including basic

information on the procedure for the recognition of diplomas for some professions in the border region between the Netherlands and Germany (a usual practice in the BENELUX, but not in the EU). The expert advising the *Atlantic Transpyrenees Conference's* case to coordinate the information on minimum income and other social benefits across the FR-ES border highlighted the need to share information to prevent irregular situations. And the expert assigned to the case of the German municipality of Emmerich am Rhein proposed stronger coordination across the DE-NL border to share information on seasonal labour migrants to ensure their systematic registration (this situation might be found very often in other EU internal borders). When it is about the exchange of personal data, there are important implications to consider which might undermine trust, but there is a sufficient EU framework to guarantee the protection of individuals' data.

4.3. Fostering CB institutional stability/credibility of CB entities

Several *b-solutions* cases demonstrate that existing EU instruments and tools are fundamental for local authorities to solve and overcome certain obstacles to CBC, increasing their interaction and promoting trust. For example, communication and coordination across the Dutch-German border will be strengthened to enable the shared care of children and young people in the Municipality of Winterswijk through an Interreg project. The recommended solution is using Interreg to launch a co-working group on youth welfare among the relevant actors and competent authorities. Those living on one side of the border but going to school on the other could receive CB social and medical care if the appropriate agreement on care and costs (a major issue) is achieved. The pilot action implemented by PAMINA also recommended the use of Interreg projects to facilitate the involvement of all stakeholders in the development of the proposed solutions for many different obstacles identified in the access to healthcare by CB workers across the FR-DE border. The Eurometropolis Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai EGTC (FR-BE) decided to continue the work started with their *b-solutions* pilot action through an Interreg project to ensure the sustainability of the results achieved so far to facilitate CB dual education, coordinating the different authorities involved, and testing mobility and language skills. The province of Pontevedra will use Interreg to promote the standardisation of technical options for electronic waste collection centres across the ES-PT border. And this is also the case of the CB North Sea Port authorities in BE-NL to facilitate CB operations across their border, as the case submitted by the Euroregion Scheldemond clearly illustrates. The regional governments of Lower Austria and Burgenland also proposed Interreg to continue with the solutions identified with their pilot action to promote bilingualism in the triple AT-HU-SK border. They have also considered Erasmus+ to facilitate the exchange of teachers and promote pupils' mobility and school

partnerships. And the Galicia-Norte de Portugal Euroregional Studies Center has also considered Erasmus+ to raise awareness at the EU level of the barriers to the CB mobility of students belonging to under-represented, disadvantaged or vulnerable groups within the university community of the CB region.

Similarly, establishing an EGTC is considered as a solution to improve business opportunities between Lithuania and Poland in the Lazdijai District Municipality. A CB business incubator could only receive funds across this border through a joint legal entity due to very restrictive financial provisions on public expenditure on the other side of the border. One of the long-term options proposed by the expert advising the case of the joint FR-DE European Archaeological Park at Bliesbuck-Reinheim is also the creation of a new EGTC as a binding structure for CBC and for more European visibility.

The prospective value of the proposed CB tool (see Footnote nr. 9) was underlined in some cases, above all when the suggested solution would entail a modification of legal or administrative provisions. In the case of the Cerdanya Cross-border Hospital (Spanish-French border), the adviser indicated that the ECBM could have permitted an exceptional regime to recognise diplomas, clearing the procedures to employ French doctors (the facility is in Spanish territory but also involving French professionals and patients). These procedures require the involvement of several actors and are complex and time-consuming. A legal tool to facilitate CB solutions would also be an optimal option for the abovementioned case of the Eurometropolis Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai EGTC, derogating some aspects of the French, Walloon and Flemish provisions which collide and impede the effective realisation of CB apprenticeships. They have found a good alternative through a 'CB derogation agreement'. This has also been included as one of the possible solutions for minors' mobility at the ES-PT border; by the CB North Sea Port (BE-NL) as a 'new governance solution'; and by the EGTC Eurodistrict Saar-Moselle (FR-DE) to optimize standards and harmonize different provisions on co-financing, taxation, staffing, safety and standards for CB *crèches* (nurseries). Local and regional stakeholders in the IT-SI CB area want to set up a CB Special Economic Zone, where such a tool would facilitate harmonising administrative and operational procedures. Likewise, the Italian Social Security Institute considers that this tool could facilitate the coordination with other EU Member States' regulations regarding social security reimbursement procedures. It could also be an option at the BE-NL border to facilitate the implementation of CB LEADER initiatives, as the LEADER programmes are designed country by country and do not take into account CB operations. And the expert advising the case submitted by the Saarpfalz district in Germany has also found it as a partial way to gain a joint entrance for the DE-FR Archaeological Park. The case of the Gate-To-Europe EGTC (HU-RO) also finds it a very useful tool to facilitate the identification of local producers from

Hungary to sell their products on the Romanian side. The regional government of Extremadura would also use it for the reciprocal recognition of certificates of aviation crews participating in CB firefight operations. And also the Euroregion Scheldemond would use it to solve bottlenecks in transporting biological and chemical waste for agricultural purposes, such as manure, across the NL-BE border.

4.4. Supporting CB territorial integration

Overcoming border barriers is a lengthy and complicated process, requiring specific solutions for each case where the level of trust between institutions is crucial. Legal solutions often need the involvement of multiple competent authorities at different scales, navigating in two or more legal and administrative frameworks. Two good examples come from the experience of the Consortium of the CTP, the Working Community of the Pyrenees (composed of the six French-Spanish border regions and the Principality of Andorra) and the EGTC GO (Italian-Slovenian border). In both cases, local policymakers and cooperation partners spent fifteen months preparing the conditions to propose draft bilateral cooperation agreements between the national authorities involved. They have progressed in setting up new CB bus lines and enabled CB emergency care interventions, which help to increase territorial integration. Another example comes from the expert advising a Minho River EGTC's case, who proposed a systematic process of communication, coordination and sharing of information to better cooperate on the protection and promotion of CB natural landscapes.

As previously indicated, many cases reveal the need to amend the legal and administrative framework to overcome a border barrier. Sometimes, this amendment is only needed on one side of the border, as in the case submitted by the Bulgarian-Romanian Interuniversity Europe Center at the 'Angel Kanchev' University of Ruse: a change in the Bulgarian legal provisions is foreseen in order to enrol foreign students. This is also the case with the Portuguese Vehicle Tax Code, which allows Spanish CB workers to use their private vehicles in Portugal without restrictions. Or the Hungarian legislation on EGTCs to be able to co-finance these CB entities also when they are established in any of the neighbouring Member States.

Otherwise, other cases illustrate that in order to enable the provision of essential services in border regions, the adoption of mutual agreements amending the legal or administrative framework is needed. The EGTC GO (IT-SI) and the CTP (ES-FR-AD) managed to achieve those agreements. Still, the difficulties for the citizens living on the Latvian side to access the hospital on the Estonian side of Valga-Valka twin cities exemplify such a need, as there are no signs of progress in the implementation of the proposed intergovernmental approach due to a lack of interest by one of the national authorities involved, generating an enormous frustration in the potential Latvian patients of

the Valga hospital who still have to go to the closest Latvian hospital 50 km away. There are more cases where a bilateral agreement is the major aspect of the proposed solutions, which can only be achieved if a minimum level of trust has been reached, motivating political willingness to actively intervene. To mention a few: the EGTC Eurometropolis Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai (FR-BE) has proposed a framework agreement for CB dual education, Galicia-Norte de Portugal EGTC (ES-PT) to simplify the CB mobility of minors for cultural or education exchanges, the EGTC GO (IT-SI) to set up a Special Economic Zone in Nova Gorica-Gorizia, the Saarpfalz district to establish a single CB entrance for the European Archaeological Park at Bliesbruck-Reinheim (DE-FR) under the Treaty of Aachen, the Municipality of Winterswijk to facilitate the (NL-DE) CB exchange of renewable energy, and Euregio Scheldemond (BE-NL) for the transport of biological and chemical waste for agriculture purposes.

Complementary responses, not only eliminating legal or administrative obstacles, appear to be also relevant in the EU *b-solutions* in order to seek a more integrated common territory. For example, the Latvian Environment, Geology and Meteorology Centre and the Summit Secretariat of the Greater Region EGTC implement new approaches and harmonised methods to monitor hydrogeological and spatial data. The region Friuli Venezia Giulia has promoted a bilingual module for tax declaration for CB workers (IT-SI), facilitating their correct fulfilment of fiscal obligations. The public entity *Extremadura Avante* has developed various measures to avoid potential custom problems regarding the implementation and, particularly, the future operation of a CB logistical platform at the ES-PT border. The Euroregion Scheldemond (BE-NL) promotes CB partnerships to implement LEADER projects across their border, modifying traditional LEADER schemes into a single Managing Authority for the CB area. All these cases should also serve as an inspiration for those border regions which have not submitted any obstacles yet to an initiative which is still open and it seems it will still be for quite some time.

5. Policy recommendations for increasing CB institutional trust

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on border regions in general (Lara-Valencia and Laine, 2022), and CB regions in particular in almost every policy domain (Medeiros et al., 2021a). Expectedly, covidfencing processes (Novotný, 2022) in Europe resulting from this pandemic, negatively affected CB institutional trust in European borders. It is now routinely contended that a resurgence of ‘unilateralism’ vis-à-vis ‘cross-border integration’ coined a new phase of European state relations (Böhm, 2021), at least for some time, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Soon after some central governments orders to impose strict control on border crossings, all across

Europe, existing CBC entities engaged in pro-active actions to re-open national borders, in particular to CB commuters (Medeiros et al., 2021a; Opiłowska, 2021). Indeed, the effective intervention of several CB entities (Euroregions, EGTCs, Eurocities) to combat covidfencing processes, forged over past decades of systematic CB collaboration and trust building (Kaucic and Sohn, 2021; Reitel et al., 2018), mostly on the North-western European borders (Medeiros, 2011), ended up widening and reinforcing “common foundations against future crises” (Weber, 2022: 374).

Based on the lessons learned, some policy recommendations can be addressed to policymakers engaged in CBC at all levels. Firstly, the EU, through instruments such as Interreg, EGTC etc., who holds the strongest support for CBC. Secondly, the national authorities, as they bear most competences and, importantly, they decide EU political and budgetary priorities. Thirdly, the sub-national level, where a plea of different jurisdictions and devolved powers – municipalities, regions, provinces, districts – have also certain competences and a strong knowledge on CBC. The following recommendations are just indicative, pointing to some broad areas where further multi-level and common endeavours would lead to specific policy proposals and/or concrete measures.

a) Improving the capacities of local stakeholders in cross-border regions: the EC and Interreg Programmes’ Managing Authorities and Joint Secretariats should encourage enhanced capacity building of local and regional stakeholders to, first, increase awareness, knowledge and understanding as regards CBC practices and related procedures; and second, to plan, design and apply tailor-made arrangements to resolve particular border obstacles. Local/regional universities and research institutions should be involved in designing and implementing a series of capacity-building measures such as: supporting commitment and understanding of CB issues as regards all strategic policy areas through improved training provision, and assisting local/regional authorities and CB structures (Euroregions, EGTCs) and their information or coordination units to inform citizens and organisations about CB related issues, in particular, advising on measures to resolve limitations to CBC and providing information on legal and administrative exigencies to observe the neighbouring countries’ normative frameworks.

b) Also important is the need to boosting effective multi-level commitment and joint solutions and to maximising the value of EU tools and instruments. As a starting point, it is worth considering enabling the effective implementation of the proposed CB tool or any other alternative to be adopted by the Member States at the Council. In this stance, national and regional authorities could have triggered coordination points, but there has not been any success so far. Moreover, the EC should provide improved information on identified obstacles and replicable solutions, increasing mutual learning. To do so, one key measure would be to reinforce the Border Focal Point: this initiative was established by the Communication on Border regions (EC, 2017) to assist the experts’ network

identified during the CB Review in 2015-2017, and it has proved to be a very useful tool to dynamize networking, disseminate information, promote partnerships, etc., amongst the ‘CB Family’. The information gathered by the different stakeholders – including a repository of cooperation structures, initiatives, relevant documents and solutions to border obstacles – could be integrated into a single digital platform, where relevant information on CBC – stakeholders, resources, projects, *b-solutions*, CPS (CB Public Services), etc. – could be mapped and easily available for anyone interested. For these recommendations to be taken forward and to be effective in helping to overcome obstacles in border regions, key politicians and policymakers should trust each other across the border. They should also be decorated with a strong commitment with CBC as the cement of the European House.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This article has analysed to what extent the implementation of the EU *b-solutions* initiative contributes to reinforcing CB institutional trust along European CB regions, especially in a context marked by the pandemic and the so-called covidfencing processes (Medeiros et al., 2021ab; Novotný, 2022). The authors have reviewed the 90 cases selected and studied in 2018-2021 with trust in mind, paying particular attention to those 41 with notorious institutional implications. We have gone through the reports prepared by the experts assigned to every case, but the summaries prepared for the two compendiums (AEBR and EC, 2020b, 2021) already offer a very good overview. They have been very useful in analysing the following parameters within the four main components of CB institutional trust identified by the authors (Fig. 2), based on a review of specialised literature: capacity building (knowledge of the legal provisions involved, regional/local understanding of the obstacles); knowledge sharing (weak/strong first approach, availability of/access to CB information); stability/credibility of CB entities (Euroregions, Eurodistricts, Eurocities, EGTCs) and instruments (Interreg, EGTC, proposed CB tool); and supporting CB territorial integration (mediation between two or more national frameworks, amending just one side’s provisions, bilateral agreement, new approaches and methodologies). It is important to bear in mind that “trust” is an analytical component employed to study the 41 cases, hence it is not necessarily mentioned as such in the reports. Also, our overarching analysis complements previous works studying different databases composed by several CB areas (Chilla and Lambracht, 2022; Kaucic and Sohn, 2021; Medeiros et al., 2021a; Durà et al., 2018).

Crucially, the implementation of the EU *b-solutions* approved projects has contributed to increment CB trust, by enhancing institutional capacity building and CB institutional knowledge sharing between involved entities in better developing and strengthening the necessary skills,

abilities, processes and resources needed (UN, 2023) to find co-created practical solutions (OECD, 2015), in order to mitigating complex legal and administrative issues related to persisting CB obstacles. Hence, *b-solutions* enhances existing capacities and stimulates further capacity building with the acquisition of new competences and know-how by the local/regional players to fully assess hindrances to cooperation, even if they are based on complex issues involving at least two different legal/administrative systems, but also the possible mechanisms to implement a solution. Systematic and continuous professional training of a wide range of stakeholders, generalisation of information and coordination units at the local/regional authorities in border regions (or CB entities) to keep citizens and organisations well informed about all CB issues, promoting comparative studies addressing knowledge gaps, and involving all stakeholders at EU, national, regional, local and CB levels are some of the proposed capacity building measures within the policy recommendation included in the first volume of the first *b-solutions* Compendium (AEBR & EC, 2020a). It should be noted the role of language skills in multilingual CB environments.

b-solutions especially promotes knowledge sharing between all involved stakeholders in a CB and multi-level way, including the national authorities, with a crucial role when a change in legislation is needed. National governments and parliaments might ask for studies to clarify some obstacles (or the role of certain instruments) and could easily organize forums of experts and stakeholders to move forward in a multi-level way, combining top-down and bottom-up approaches. A sufficient level of mutual trust between institutions and all involved stakeholders is needed to successfully operate these procedures involving various levels of administration in at least two countries and a certain constellation of organisations. This would also facilitate the generation of enough capacities and understanding to perform thorough research of the obstacles, clarifying the complexity of overlapping competences amongst the variety of authorities involved, and getting access to accurate CB information or, at least, enough data from both sides (data integration and consolidation would be another story, as their protection is).

With long-standing examples of CB initiatives and practices (Durà et al., 2018; Kaucic and Sohn, 2021; Chilla and Lambracht, 2022), CB entities such as informal Euroregions or even institutionalised EGTCs are the bulwarks of CB institutional stability/credibility. Here, the EU *b-solutions* initiative has been largely implemented by such EU CBC entities, as well as border municipalities, thus reinforcing their role as backwards of CBC and contributing to reinforce CB institutional trust between both sides of the border. Several EGTCs have led some of the *b-solutions* cases analysed, and the creation of a new EGTC is considered as a possible solution in various cases. Even more: the foresight CB tool is also seen as a valuable instrument in order to overcome some specific border barriers. In that sense, *b-solutions* not only highlights the role of CB entities but also

maximises the value of other EU tools and instruments, such as Interreg, the EGTCs, the Border Focal Point or the proposed mechanism.

Finally, in order to strengthen CB territorial integration, specific policies are needed, such as common public services or a longed-for shared spatial planning (Medeiros, 2021b; Durand and Decoville, 2018). The cases shown in section 4 exemplify how reinforcing the practices in these specific issues can lead to a more favourable CB institutional trust environment with wider and sounder CBC contacts and initiatives. In any case, every region has its particularities, and so have its neighbours. Every interaction in every border ‘dyad’ is a particular universe with its own characters, script and production. This is illustrated by the fact that there are no ‘off the shelf’ solutions, but every obstacle should rather be analysed individually. In the end, a legal solution such as a bilateral (or multilateral) agreement, an amendment or derogation from laws at any level, will require the engagement and animation of a wide network, the involvement of many authorities and the mediation between various legal and administrative frameworks, as many of the reviewed cases illustrate.

All in all, our results are in line with the idea of institutional trust as a particular kind of people’s “expectations” not only on institutions, but also on the neighbours’ assumptions and shared values (Devon et al., 2015; Welter et al., 2008). The analysed cases show how the different forms of CB trust identified by Koch (2018), Durand and Decoville (2020) and Meyer (2022) are essential in order to foster CB projects and initiatives. In this regard, it has been proved how important the knowledge of the socio-cultural, historical-institutional and political contexts of the other side of the border is, fostering ideational and institutional trust (Durand and Decoville, 2019), and seeking a reduction of complicated instruments and procedures (Koch, 2018). And, of course, personal interactions (between politicians, technical staff and others, at different administrative levels) are also a key element in order to create a common, familiar, credible, benevolent, shared and trusted CB work atmosphere (Pavlou, 2002; Liedong et al., 2015). As shown in this research, despite all the difficulties, CBC is still in place, some initiatives have been even reinforced after the pandemic, and there are enough elements to counterbalance both the idea of the end of a ‘borderless Europe’ and the processes of re-bordering (Böhm, 2021, Opiłowska, 2021; Weber, 2022).

Finally, not every border region within the EU and with Pre-Accession countries (eligible under *b-solutions*) has benefited the most from this institutional support, while the Benelux, Germany and France, as well as the Iberian CB areas, stand out. A stronger effort should be made to involve those territories not taking part yet, while already identified solutions should be pushed forward. Also, as a future line of research, a specific *mirroring* study on “mistrust” following a higher number of *b-solution* initiative cases and other databases could be developed, in order to better identify all the ever-longing barriers (mental, social, political, economic...) that still need to be overcome.

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