



LEGAL ACCESSIBILITY AMONG THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

Forum and international conference under the
Hungarian V4 presidency

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On 14 and 15 September 2021, CESCO, supported by the Ministry of Justice, organised a forum and an international conference on legal accessibility between the Visegrad countries, as, although the topic has received increasing attention in recent years, there are still many obstacles within the EU due to a lack of harmonisation of laws. While the binding legislation for Member States is constantly expanding and is being progressively incorporated into the legal order of all these countries, experience shows that several legal and administrative obstacles resulting from differences in administrative systems and legislative background, still complicate the daily lives of people living along the border and the success of cross-border cooperation.

CESCI has been working for years to achieve these goals; in 2018-2019, with the support of the International Visegrad Fund, a project was implemented with the involvement of experts from the four countries concerned, aiming to establish a permanent V4 mechanism to remove legal barriers between the partner countries. Using the Nordic Council of Ministers' Freedom of Movement Council as a model, experts from the four countries proposed the creation of a platform adapted to the legislative processes and socio-economic-political contexts of the V4 countries. With the support of the grant provided by the Ministry of Justice in 2021, CESCO undertook to organise a forum and an international conference in the autumn of 2021, in line with the Hungarian V4 presidency, to promote the systematic identification and removal of legal barriers between the Visegrad countries and related EU policy initiatives. The forum and the conference the following day focused on addressing the legal and administrative obstacles that still hamper cross-border cooperation and mobility between the Visegrad countries.

The first day of the event was opened by Melinda Benczi, CESCO's strategic planner and analyst, who briefly took the audience back in time, the first stop of which was October 1335, when the Congress of Visegrád took place with the participation of the Bohemian king John of Luxembourg and the Polish king Casimir the Great, at the invitation of king Charles Robert of Hungary. The cooperation led to the joint action of three middle powers of the time regarding the trade and the distribution of goods throughout Europe, as well as to a military alliance against German and Austrian ambitions for power, thus establishing a close cooperation between the countries.

The next stop of the imaginary journey was 15 February 1991, when the leaders of the three recently liberated Central European countries (József Antall of Hungary, Václav Havel of the Czech Republic and Lech Walesa of Poland) signed a pact to dismantle the remnants of the communist regime, to support the democratic transition, to develop their economies in cooperation and to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic area. Slovakia, which became independent in 1993, joined the cooperation, thus forming the Visegrad Four, the members of which joined the European Union together. It was noted in the welcome speech, that the intensity of cooperation varied over the three decades since the establishment of the group, but was perhaps the strongest in recent years, and Hungary is happy to help further strengthen it as the current president of the V4.

The audience learned about CESCO, the association organizing the event. It was founded in 2009 following the suggestion and the model of the French Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT), with the aim of promoting cross-border cooperation, to strengthen mutual trust and to reduce the divisive effects of borders in the Central European region. The association addresses the issue of borders in a comprehensive way, conducts scientific research on border regions, participates actively in the development and evaluation of cross-border programming documents and EU programmes, supports local actors by providing information, developing projects and setting up

sustainable cooperation structures, and it is involved in the development of national and EU policy frameworks. Accordingly, the association is also committed to support all initiatives for internal mobility, exchanges, networking and trust building between the Visegrad countries.

The discussion was moderated by Gyula Ocskay, secretary general of CESCO, who first introduced the participants of the forum: Tibor Bial, ambassador of the Czech Republic, Jerzy Snopek, ambassador of Poland, Attila Szép, first secretary of the Embassy of Slovakia in Budapest, Slawomir Tokarski, Director of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy and Péter Kiss-Parciu, deputy state secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The forum was opened with a look back at the past, with participants recalling sometimes frightening, sometimes incomprehensible or even comical situations from a time, when crossing the border was not a simple and straightforward process, but instead it was preceded by time-consuming administrative difficulties (passport applications, currency exchange, long wait, etc.). This was followed by an overview of the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on the various border sections as perceived by residents living near the border. According to the participants of the forum, the Visegrad countries reacted in a rather similar way to the spread of the pandemic, first by closing their borders and then by trying to adjust the rules to the different cross-border needs in a way that helps to contain the pandemic without obstructing cross-border mobility, especially of workers.

During the discussion, the participants also analysed the integration between the Visegrad countries, which showed that the economic ties between the four countries are steadily improving, which is linked to the growing number of cultural and interpersonal initiatives. Naturally, there are still significant legal and administrative barriers that need to be removed to further stimulate relations, but participants agreed that the shared goals are a source of optimism.



The conference on 15 September attempted to extend the *Legal Accessibility* initiative to the Visegrad Four, but did not seek to predict or encourage policy decisions. The conference consisted of two main parts. The audience was first introduced to the European context through the presentations of Pavel Branda (deputy mayor of Rádlo, member of the COTER Commission of the Committee of the Regions) and Jean Peyrony (director general of the Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière), then later gained a deeper insight into the functioning of the B-Solution initiative aimed at accessibility thanks to the presentation of Martín Guillermo-Ramírez (secretary general of the Association of European Border Regions). The second session of the conference focused on local barriers encountered at the borders of the Visegrad countries, which were identified using the methodology proposed by B-Solution.

The conference started with three welcome speeches, outlining the topics to be discussed at the meeting, the importance and the historical background of the issue, and the significance of the upcoming V4 presidency and the Visegrad cooperation. First, Melinda Benczi, strategic planner of CESCO, welcomed the participants and gave a brief overview of the integration of the issue of cross-border barriers into policy making. She highlighted that the topic of legal and administrative barriers received particular attention in 2015, when the 'Cross-Border Review' project was launched as an initiative of Commissioner Corina Crețu. This resulted in a professional study ('Easing legal and administrative obstacles in EU border regions'), which compiles and analyses existing cross-border challenges, moreover it functions as a database of good practices and it also launched a wide-ranging consultation process. Thanks to positive developments, the European Commission has also taken up the issue and highlighted the role of border regions in the European Union in a communication ('Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions') and highlighted the role of border regions in the European Union and envisaged interventions in 10 areas.

In 2018, the 'Border Focal Point' for knowledge sharing was set up, which serves as both a coordinator and a forum for breaking down legal barriers to borders. An online platform has been set up to provide an opportunity to share experiences and good practices. In parallel, a consultation process has been launched to implement these interventions. The Commission published a summary report on the results in July 2021 ('EU Border Regions: Living Labs of European Integration').



After the speech of CESC's associate, Petr Mareš, the director of the International Visegrad Fund, welcomed the audience. In his presentation, he called the attention to the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on borders, which almost immediately set back the state of cross-border cooperation that had been slowly developing over the years. He emphasised in particular the role of the health sector, as many health workers and nurses living along the border were unable to commute, but he also mentioned the damage that personal relationships along the border suffered, as several families and communities were (again) cut off from each other. In his assessment of the cooperation between the Visegrad Four, he drew attention to the structure of the organisation. He considered it a shortcoming that the creation of the Visegrad cooperation was politically motivated, and that strong support came only from the highest (state) level. He felt the role of citizens in taking the initiative is weak, as few people see the practical benefits of the V4 at the local level and generally they do not experience the effects of cooperation in their daily lives. 'What can the V4 offer to the people?' - asked the speaker. During the health crisis, the V4 has not been able to provide an adequate response to the closure of borders, which calls into question the success and depth of cooperation. Nonetheless, the cooperation should prove the strength of joint work and provide an alternative at European level. An important question is whether the Visegrad cooperation can be seen as exemplary, but this would require social support and institutional development.

The welcoming speeches were concluded with the remarks of András Lázár, national coordinator of the Visegrad Cooperation. His speech focused on the upcoming Hungarian presidency of the V4 starting from 1 July, but he also praised the usefulness and success of the Legal Accessibility (JOGa) project. He introduced the three pillars of the Visegrad cooperation, which can be described by the keywords of stability, re-opening and partnership. Stability covers all decision-making and legislative processes that affect the foundations of cooperation. The V4 can be seen as a high-level political partnership, as it is already represented at EU level and the members hold separate consultations before making major decisions. Furthermore, the V4 is also open to cooperation with other neighbouring countries, such as those in the Balkans or the Baltics, which further strengthens alliance's position in the region. Reopening mainly concerns post-Covid economic and infrastructure

developments. For the Visegrad countries, large-scale infrastructural development is of great importance, and it strengthens the ties between the countries. One such project, launched three years ago, is built around the idea of a high-speed train. The project, which currently only has a feasibility study, would link the capitals of the four countries and would follow the route of the Western European high-speed railway network.

Another major project is Via Carpathia, which would provide road access between the Baltic and the Balkans. The express road would serve as a corridor between North and South and would be integrated into the European core network, alleviating Europe's strong West-East orientation and allowing Central and Eastern European countries to connect with each other. The final pillar of the partnership is based on the Visegrad+ programme, which allows the building and maintaining of relations with other countries. The programme has fostered cooperation in areas such as the scientific world, the support of start-ups and institutional and educational collaboration. Neighbourhood policy plays an important role in the V4's political action, as the four countries actively support the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU, while they also cooperate with EU actors. András Lázár cited this year's V4+ summit in Ljubljana, which made it possible for the prime ministers of Slovenia, which holds the rotating presidency of the EU, and the Visegrad countries to meet during the Hungarian presidency, and to coordinate the Slovenian EU presidency with the Hungarian Visegrad presidency. In his concluding remarks, he stressed that the V4 cooperation, which is also visible at the social level, is mainly based on mobility (construction of railways and roads, adoption of vaccination documents) and education (scholarships) projects. Cooperation, however, should not be limited to the political level, therefore the involvement of local authorities and stakeholders should be improved and grassroots initiatives should be supported. The four freedoms of the European Union (free movement of goods, services, persons and capital) coincide with the principles of the V4, and therefore as national coordinator of the V4, he supports the continuation of the *Legal Accessibility* project.

Following the welcoming speeches, the European context was presented by Pavel Branda, deputy mayor of Rádlo and a member of the COTER Commission of the Committee of the Regions. In his presentation, he outlined the future of cross-border cooperation in the European Union on the basis of the 'Resolution on a vision for Europe: The Future of Cross-border Cooperation' adopted by the Committee of the Regions on 1 July 2021. At the beginning of his presentation, he talked about the monitoring carried out during the covid19 pandemic, in order to measure the effects of the border restrictions.

He then presented the proposals of COTER. According to them, a minimum level of cross-border cooperation should be defined at EU level, so that the four freedoms of the Union and the Schengen area are not compromised, even in times of crises such as the current covid19 pandemic. The root of the problem is that the first step taken by local and national authorities was to close the borders, which suggests a complete lack of trust. Efforts must now be directed towards changing this and building mutual trust, so that the authorities and inhabitants of neighbouring areas do not fear each other. Another challenge is to establish a legal framework for health care (training and practice) so that borders are not a barrier to accessing health care. The aim is to ensure that patients are always transferred to the nearest hospital instead of having to risk their lives just to receive care in their own country, in compliance with the law. An important aspect is the reform of data management. The central Eurostat is not an adequate tool to cover borders, so instead a database focusing on cross-border data should be set up, which would be capable of collecting and sharing local information. It

is important to improve transport connections so that goods and passenger traffic can move across the border without hindrance. Freedom of movement and services contributes to improving the quality of life, thus improving border permeability is fundamental to people's quality of life. The issue of public transport across the border and its development is a priority. There is an urgent need to reform the education system so that language learning is introduced in children's daily lives as early as possible. In order to overcome language barriers, it is essential that the teaching of languages should cover not only the major international languages but also the languages of the neighbouring country. It is important to see the other factors besides the economic ones, such as human relations or quality of life. The basis of all cooperation is building trust, which can be achieved through people projects. Local people are the ones most familiar with the challenges encountered at the borders, so the first step is to gather information from them and then analyse it to find solutions. While the deputy mayor praised the success of Interreg and Erasmus, he believed it was time to go beyond these programmes.



Following the speech of Pavel Branda, Jean Peyrony, director general of the French Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT), shared his thoughts. MOT has become one of the most renowned platforms on the subject in Europe and, unsurprisingly, has played an active role as a professional in the preparation of the new EU instrument, the European cross-border mechanism (ECBM), initiated by the Luxembourg presidency to reduce the impact of border obstacles. The presentation started with the listing of the main obstacles of cross-border cooperation. These barriers include differences in economic development, the degree of institutionalisation, the political dimension, technical and administrative differences, cultural differences, the lack of knowledge or unwillingness to cooperate. In addition, the form of cooperation is determined by geography, the level of cooperation and solution (EU, national, regional, local), the scale of the action (unilateral or multilateral) and the thematic area itself (employment, transport, etc.). As a practical example, he mentioned the border hospital in Cerdanya, located on the French-Spanish border. The creation of a joint hospital, financed by Interreg and under supervised by the EGTC, is a major step forward, but has not solved all the obstacles, therefore new measures need to be taken to overcome them. Peyrony talked about the six dimensions of running a hospital, including administrative (nursing protocol), economic (cost of care, social security), political (the role of authorities), informational, cultural (ethics, attitudes) and individual (relations with nurses, doctor-patient relations) obstacles.

The greatest remaining barrier for the hospital are the high transaction costs, which need to be addressed by the use of a new EU instrument, the ECBM.

According to the two key aspects of ECBM, local stakeholders should be allowed to come up with their own solutions, and a multi-level framework should be built to identify the challenge locally and to address the problem from there. The nation states have the right to reject a proposed solution from the local level, but the decision must be clear and swift. Furthermore, mandatory 'EU border coordination points' should be established at national or regional level in each Member State, taking over the responsibility of coordination from the nation states. As an example of good practice, he mentioned the ECBC project on the Franco-German border, which enabled the extension of the tramway track between Strasbourg and Kehl. As different standards were applicable on the two sides of the Rhine, a continuous tramway network could not be established between the two cities. To overcome this issue, they used the ECBC instrument, which allowed the national line to cross the border, in practice allowing one side of the border to adopt the regulations of the other side.

Overall, the ECBM develops a bottom-up structure, whereby local actors perceive a problem and then propose solutions to address the challenge. This is presented at the national level, where the local proposal is evaluated, the legislation is amended, and cooperation is harmonised accordingly, and finally a decision is taken at bilateral, multilateral or EU level. Peyrony pointed out as a conclusion that in Europe several organisations (AEBR, CESCO, MOT) have the knowledge to coordinate border regions. It is important that the cooperation gains the support of the inhabitants of the border region, that experiences are exchanged and that problem solving is taken to a higher (governmental) level (future 'ECBM national contact points') in order to tackle the remaining obstacles. The process would ultimately culminate in a unified European database ('European multi level platform'), which would gather all obstacles and solutions encountered in practice.

The final presentation on the European perspective was given by Martín Guillermo-Ramírez, secretary general of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR). In 2017, the European Commission adopted a communication, titled Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions, which proposed interventions in a number of areas to remove existing legal and administrative barriers within the EU. Among other things, it proposed a project aimed at identifying existing barriers at local level and proposing solutions. The result of this was the B-Solutions (Border Solutions) project, where experts analysed and proposed solutions to 100 specific obstacles encountered at the border. This project was and will be managed for the period 2021-2027 by AEBR, and the secretary general summarised the experience gained.

At the beginning of the presentation, the audience was introduced to the barriers identified in the studies, which revealed that, in terms of policy and intervention areas, the most difficulties were found in the areas of labour market and education, followed by social security and health, and thirdly by transportation and mobility. Likewise, legal and administrative barriers were ranked first in the online survey on barriers to border crossing, but language barriers and difficult physical connections were also considered significant challenges. This was followed in descending order by economic differences, the commitment of local authorities, socio-cultural differences and, last but not least, the lack of trust. In total, more than 200 barriers have been identified, most of which were encountered at the Western European border. Ramírez's findings showed that the use of ECBM and B-Solutions was most common in the areas of institutional cooperation, health, transport and employment. The objectives of the project include identifying barriers to cross-border cooperation, raising the interest

of key stakeholders, developing sustainable solutions, strengthening information exchange and developing joint working methods with public bodies. Potential applicants include cross-border entities and public bodies, while eligibility criteria include a well-defined and documented barrier, the involvement of partners from both sides of the border, the existence of at least one internal land border and compliance with one of the 5 thematic areas identified by the project. The selection will take into account the feasibility and applicability of the solution proposal, the composition of the partnership, its replicability in other border areas, its impact on cross-border cooperation, the quality of the proposal and the expected transparency.

As a result of the survey of barriers, the first inventory contains 43 cases and the second inventory is now being prepared. The majority of the collected cases (15-15) originate from the French and Spanish borders, but a significant number (8-8-8) are linked to Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. Out of the 90 cases selected, most of them are related to institutional cooperation (33), employment (22), health (17) and public transport (11), but other cases include multilingualism, data access, e-government or the provision of information. Guillermo-Ramírez concluded the presentation by introducing the policy proposals published by the AEBR, highlighting capacity building (improving training offers, increasing service capacity), effective multi-level action (legal mechanisms, joint analyses and studies, improving the dialogue) and the full use of EU instruments (ECBM, Interreg and other EU instruments).

Following the three presentations, the audience had the opportunity to ask questions about the presentations. Branda highlighted the need for external support for cross-border cooperation. In his view, municipalities are only able to carry out the necessary basic tasks due to their workload and cannot invest more time and money in cross-border programmes. For this reason, such cooperations require constant stimulus, and local authorities should be encouraged to work more closely together, otherwise the cross-border links that have been established will wither. This requires additional money and instruments, which the EU provides (Interreg, EGTC), but often lacks the right framework of conditions, which could be addressed through the ECBM. Peyrony stressed the importance of grassroots activities, pointing out that stakeholders know the problems best, but cannot solve them without a legal and institutional framework. Consequently, tackling obstacles should start at the local level and only later should be taken up to the higher levels. Finally, Guillermo-Ramírez highlighted the power and necessity of small projects, pointing out that large infrastructure projects cannot necessarily break down the mental barrier to the extent small, human-scale projects can.



During the second panel, the speakers presented B-Solutions cases that were identified and investigated along the borders of the Visegrad countries. The purpose of presenting these examples is to highlight the significance of the problem and the need to address it. At European level, 1/3 of the population lives in border regions and, with the exception of Poland, the proportion is much higher in the Visegrad countries, with more than half of the population living in such regions in the other three countries. The daily lives of these people are profoundly affected by the barriers that the B-Solutions project addresses. During the rest of the conference, 5 speakers presented barriers and proposals to address them.

The first speaker of the session was Rafael Peszka, the initiator of the Lithuanian-Polish cross-border functional area, who promotes the development of cross-border cooperation in the region as a volunteer. In his presentation, he described the discrimination border regions face and its underlying causes, depicting the constant disadvantaged situation of peripheral areas as a kind of "vicious circle". Public investment is mostly concentrated in the interior areas, as opposed to the hard-to-reach periphery areas, leaving the border region with poor infrastructure and public services. Inadequate road networks, poor education and low levels of institutionalisation discourage private investment in the area, resulting in unemployment and uncompetitive wages. The difficult living conditions this creates force locals to leave the border region, which further reinforces the effects of the negative trends affecting peripheral areas. The designation of functional areas makes it possible to bring together areas with common development objectives and identical challenges.

The functional area on the Polish-Lithuanian border is mainly agricultural land, but has good industrial potential. In terms of tourism, two towns have good potential, but a complex revitalisation is needed to fully exploit their potential. One of the main advantages of the narrow border area is its favourable position in terms of transport geography, as most of the road network connecting the Baltic States with Central and Western Europe (Via Baltica, Rail Baltica) is located here. Furthermore, language barriers are not as challenging in this area as they are in other border regions of Europe, thanks to the Lithuanian minority living in Poland. Among the problems identified by Peszka are demography, poor infrastructure, scarce financial resources, unemployment, few jobs, low salaries,

and weak economic power and low level of organisation of municipalities, which force the people living in the region to work together. As a result, a declaration has been signed to promote the unified management of the areas on both sides of the border and the removal of obstacles. They aim to understand the needs of the people living in the area and to identify the problems of the local population. Thanks to the 300 questionnaires completed in the meantime and the 7 thematic meetings, the main legal obstacles that require the use of B-solutions have been identified. The important issues identified by the survey for local residents included the lack of jobs, unresolved health insurance, lack of business support, the quality of the local road network, the extent of the water network, the state of health facilities, care for the elderly and public safety. Finally, the presentation concluded with B-solutions cases identified by the Polish-Lithuanian border region, which included suggestions for the solution of the challenges posed by the lack of communication between the Polish and Lithuanian fire brigades, the costly transfer of money and by working abroad.

The second speaker was Peter Nagy, director of Ister-Granum EGTC, the oldest EGTC in Central Europe, who gave a speech on the sometimes inconsistent application of cross-border employment rules in his presentation "Misinterpretation of labour law rules".

At the beginning of the presentation, the audience heard about the obstacles identified by the EGTC, mainly related to the selling of local products (developing a common label), the creation of border crossings (creating a ferry service), the harmonisation of health care (correcting the different social security systems) and the operation of cross-border public transport. The seriousness of the problem is underlined by the fact that 10 000 people commute daily across the Slovak-Hungarian border, one third of whom face problems when working on the other side of the border. Peter Nagy devoted his presentation to a case study based on personal experience of the difficulties of working on the other side of the border and the challenges posed by different social and health insurance regulations.

Many employees work in two EU countries, but their accounts can only be settled in accordance with the legislation of only one of the countries. In the country of residence, the worker must submit an A1 certificate to find out which country's social security legislation applies to him or her. The difficulties arise from the fact that there is no clear system in place to determine which social security legislation is relevant. The classification could be based on the distribution of hours worked, which could be a good starting point for building a consistent social security system. The main difficulties of dual employment arise from the lack of information, lengthy procedures, different rules of social security, payroll and tax, different salaries and different forms.

Peter Nagy made four suggestions that could help reform the current imperfect bureaucratic system. An operational manual should be created, which would explain the given problem and its possible solutions in a transparent (and bilingual) way. The processing time for A1 certificates should be capped at 1-2 months, so that lengthy waiting times do not hinder the process. The competent insurer should inform both the employee and the company of the outcome of the procedure and, finally, a standard form should be introduced in all countries to reduce misunderstandings and bureaucratic obstacles.



Following the presentation of the challenges of the Ister-Granum EGTC, Péter Halinka, CEO of West Pannon Nonprofit Ltd., explained how language barriers were overcome at the Austrian-Hungarian-Slovak tri-border. Teaching the official language of the neighbouring country has been a 20-year-old initiative in the region, spanning three INTERREG programmes and several parallel projects.

The content of the projects is made up of several steps, the first of which is the teaching of the different languages. The investments made aim to promote linguistic diversity and support the teaching of the neighbouring language. The teaching of a foreign language to children starts in kindergarten, enabling the development of cooperation between kindergartens and schools and the generation of other cross-border activities. The next step is to promote scientific networking through the joint development of didactic materials and the creation of concepts, guides and manuals. The third step is innovative knowledge transfer, that is, the transfer of region-specific knowledge in a multilingual space. Joint further training courses, the involvement of pedagogic training institutions, cross-border visits and training courses are all appropriate means of transferring information. All these measures can help shape attitudes, building on the importance of multilingualism, which is seen as an advantage by parents, decision-makers and institutions.

In the framework of B-Solutons, Hungarian and Slovak language teaching has been launched in several settlements of Burgenland and Lower Austria, which is a successful step forward in overcoming language barriers. The speaker, however, drew attention to the importance of small-scale projects and the lack of them. He saw the implementation of small projects as a way of addressing the problems of local people, since the impact of these projects far outweighs the money spent on them. The problem is that the number of small projects achieving major results has dropped, and, at the moment, human-scale development can only be achieved by small projects integrated into larger ones. In conclusion, he called attention to the underdeveloped local public transport across the border, as there are only two services from Szombathely to Austria, which resemble mostly student services.

The conference continued with a presentation by Hynek Böhm, professor at the Technical University of Liberec ("Cross-border health care; a trinational bridge over the Neisse-Nisa-Nysa"), in which he presented two cross-border obstacles: the first related to health services, the second to the construction of a cross-border bridge.

The area around Šluknov in the Czech Republic has a special location, being cut off from the central Czech areas due to physical geography and surrounded on three sides by German settlements. The closure of the Czech hospital that operated in the area has created a dilemma for local people, as the two nearest hospitals are in Saxony, on the other side of the border. However, using German healthcare is not an attractive option for Czech citizens, as the cost of care is a third more expensive there than in the Czech Republic and, although refunds are possible under EU law, the difference between the two treatment costs is borne by the patient. The lack of coordination in the health sector stems from the right of Member States to set the cost of medical care according to their own national price lists. However, in urgent and life-threatening cases, it is essential for Czech citizens to have access to services provided by nearby German hospitals, which issue is not yet covered by a clear provision.

A solution could be to amend the existing Czech legislation on health insurance and services in order to clearly define the procedure for refunding the cost of care. This could be achieved through a multi-level governance structure and measures based on bilateral agreement. In life-threatening situations, assistance could also be easily managed through the use of technical tools (mobile apps, telephone hotlines), which would provide immediate information to the national health organisation in case the patient needed to be taken to the nearest hospital across the border. Finally, provisions for refunds in such situations should be included in national legislation. According to Hynek Böhm, the solution is to identify the leaders and key players. Local partners and hospitals on both sides of the region should be given a prominent role, leading to the creation of a 'functional region of cross-border healthcare'. Cooperation should be institutionalised and stakeholders should be involved in multi-level governance, which could be achieved through INTERREG funding and the establishment of EGTCs. Finally, the use of the ECBM could also be a good solution, as its adoption would provide an additional opportunity to create more functional health services. There was progress in 2019, as the Czech Minister of Health set up a working group to address the issue, but due to the lack of mutual solidarity during the pandemic, the parties opted for a national solution and the problem persisted.

The second example, given by Hynek Böhm, was the construction of a trilateral bridge in the area around the Czech-Polish-German border. The partners in the border region have been planning since 2004 to improve relations between them by building such a bridge. Work has not yet started, however, because the procedures for obtaining a building permit differ between the three countries and the professional qualifications of the engineers have not been accredited in advance. The situation has been further complicated by the fact that so far only bilateral agreements have been concluded for the construction of cross-border infrastructure, and therefore there is no experience or good practice regarding the triangular construction. The prolonged disputes led to a loss of patience and trust between the partners, resulting in a deadlock in the work. A possible solution could be to reverse the main construction role or to expand the team of civil engineers. Hynek Böhm pointed out that the covid has seriously set back the development of border regions and paralysed the work of cooperations. The pandemic has highlighted the lack of basic tools and structures for cross-border crisis management, and has also called for improved information collection and data

management in border regions. He concluded that the use of the ECBM methodology was necessary as it could provide a solution to the two case studies outlined in his presentation as well.



The last case study was presented by Zoltán Herke, development manager of the Arrabona EGTC, on the topic of cross-border municipal management systems. At the beginning of the presentation, he described the composition and operational areas of the EGTC. The organisation, which covers 36 municipalities in total, includes five cities (Győr, Mosonmagyaróvár, Dunajská Streda, Šamorín, Veľký Meder), of which Győr is the most important. The county seat has the professional knowledge to serve as a support and an example for the other municipalities participating in the cooperation.

The activities of the the Arrabona EGTC are mainly focused on green space management, urban management and active and cultural tourism, with a total cost of more than €30 million spent on projects. The Builcogreen project, which aims to support urban management activities and green space management, was implemented through the Slovakia-Hungary INTERREG programme. The project budget amounted to more than €273 300 and was used to share knowledge and good practices, set up a mentoring system and to develop an online machine sharing system. The mentoring scheme involved the four founding cities, whose representatives visited the leaders of the smaller municipalities and provided them with advice and suggestions for solutions. The aim of the online machinery catalogue launched under the project is to ensure that municipalities are not forced to buy specialised machinery (seaweed cutters, briquetting machines, lawn mowers, etc.) but rather share the equipment, similarly to the sharing of knowledge, information and good practice. A catalogue open to all would introduce a new approach, whereby municipalities buy services instead of machinery. Győr, as a central city, is well placed to become the centre of an online machine rental system or service provider, which would be able to provide operational services in the municipalities (even in Slovakia) outside the county seat. However, legal obstacles have been encountered during the transport of the equipment. Questions emerged as to whether the equipment could be used on both sides of the border, in what condition it could be transported across the border and whether the equipment could be transported on public roads at all. Obtaining mandatory permits and complying with different legal rules is a major obstacle to the efficient operation of the online

machine-sharing system. Finally, the EGTC used the approach of the B-Solutions project to analyse the legal operational options and to make legal proposals to remedy the problem. The project resulted in the creation of a cross-border service, the sharing of capacity and financial burden between municipalities, an increase in the level of cooperation and the strengthening of the role of the Arrabona EGTC.

The conference concluded with the remarks of Gyula Ocskay, secretary general of CESCO, who discussed the possibility of developing a mechanism between the Visegrad countries to systematically address legal barriers along the border. In 2016, a pilot project was launched with the support of the Hungarian Ministry of Justice, which included a series of workshops with border stakeholders. The aim of the discussions was to identify obstacles that hinder the daily life of border residents. With the help of the stakeholders involved, a total of 57 obstacles were identified and the underlying causes also needed to be revealed. To this end, 52 (exemplary) European interventions were collected, 68 sectoral interviews were conducted and nearly 250 pieces of legislation were analysed. The aim was to identify the points in the legislation that could be amended to overcome a large part of the obstacles identified. In total, 39 proposals for amendments were made, as well as two horizontal findings which recommend the efficient provision of information and the setting up of a permanent mechanism that supports local actors in overcoming the obstacles encountered.

In 2018 and 2019, a meeting was held with the project partners (CESCI, University of Szeged, CESCO Carpathia, Masaryk University Faculty of Science - Department of Geography, University of Warsaw - Centre for European Regional and Local Studies) to develop a model to overcome the identified obstacles within the Visegrad Fund. The objectives included strengthening cross-border mobility between the V4 countries, improving the cohesion of the Visegrad countries and the EU, and enhancing the reputation of the V4 cooperation. Project activities included a field visit to the Nordic Council, the creation of a development model for the V4 countries and the compilation of a handbook describing the steps in the evolution of the V4.

Following a study visit to Copenhagen and Malmö, an analysis was launched to develop a model adapted to the political and cultural traditions of the V4. The project resulted in the design of a three-level model, the levels of which, with varying degrees of complexity, correspond to the future pace of development of the V4. The final model is close to the organisational structure of the Nordic Council, but its immediate adoption is not recommended as the V4 does not have a similarly long history of cooperation. As a first step, national coordination points should be set up in each country in order to receive and manage any legal obstacles that may arise at the borders. Once the network of national coordination points is properly established and stable, only then can cooperation be further developed. At the second level, a forum should be established, which, in addition to the national coordination points, would include representatives of the existing V4 institutions and a representative of the Presidency. There would also be non permanent members, comprising delegates from the ministries responsible for the obstacle in question. The final, third level would be a committee which would include a parliament, a secretariat, a council of governments and a presidency in addition to the national coordination points. The secretary general concluded by reiterating that achieving this organisational structure could only be a long-term objective and that the focus should now be on the establishment of national coordination points.

At the end of the day, the conference successfully showcased the obstacles hindering cross-border cooperation and mobility and it also demonstrated the possible solutions. Within a European and

Visegrad framework, it was possible to gain insight into the successful application of new methods (ECBM, B-Solutions) and proven tools (EGTC, INTERREG). The local experiences presented by the experts from the Visegrad countries confirm the importance of overcoming the legal obstacles encountered in the border region and of adopting and applying the new tools provided by the European Union. The health crisis in 2020 has highlighted the vulnerability of border regions and the results achieved so far. Legislation affecting border areas has paralysed and made cooperation impossible, underlining the problem of not having the necessary tools for cross-border crisis management. However, overcoming the obstacles identified in the analyses has brought people on both sides of the border closer together, and the discontent arising from the temporary border closures shows that European border regions are now interconnected and that there is a need to overcome further legal obstacles.