

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES IN BORDER REGIONS

WHEN THE NEAREST
HOSPITAL HAPPENS
TO BE ABROAD



Valka and Valga showcase need to share medical services

What would you do if you broke your arm and the closest hospital was across the border?

A woman in the Latvian town of Valka didn't think twice. In much pain, she rushed to a hospital three kilometres away in Valga, Estonia.

The decision saved her from a 55 kilometre journey to the nearest hospital in Latvia. But it came at a cost – she ended up **paying out of pocket** for her treatment due to hurdles hampering EU **cross-border healthcare cooperation**.

The twin towns of Valka and Valga share a long history and were previously one municipality. When Latvia and Estonia joined the Schengen area in 2007, they essentially became a single urban region again.

But despite their proximity and EU regulations guaranteeing the right of citizens access to cross-border medical care, Latvians face a number of obstacles or difficulties linked to a **lack of information, language barriers, complex payment and reimbursement procedures** and **onerous administrative requirements**.

The situation in Valka and Valga is not uncommon and highlights the need to bolster healthcare cooperation in EU border regions.

1 city, 2 states



VALGA • VALKA

One region, one hospital

Valka and Valga are virtually one urban area split by an international border instituted in 1991 when the Baltic States regained independence after decades of Soviet rule. However, **Valga has a hospital whereas Valka does not**. Short of traveling 55 kilometres to the nearest regional Vidzeme hospital in the city of Valmiera, Latvians in Valka with emergencies are left with few options other than to cross into Estonia.

The hospital in Valga (AS Valga Haigla) is keen to provide care to as many people as possible since an increase in patients means it can claim more in state funding. This, in turn, would **enable the facility to become multidisciplinary and offer more services**.



Good practices to promote cross-border care

Improvements can be made at little cost:

- ▶ **simplify access to information** from health officials and other sources and make it available on government websites/via municipal services and hospitals
- ▶ **break down language barriers** by providing information in both Estonian and Latvian
- ▶ **clarify procedures** for submitting reimbursement documents
- ▶ **settle treatment fees** at a national level between the two countries, leaving patients to only pay the difference
- ▶ **seal a bilateral deal** on the recognition of documents.

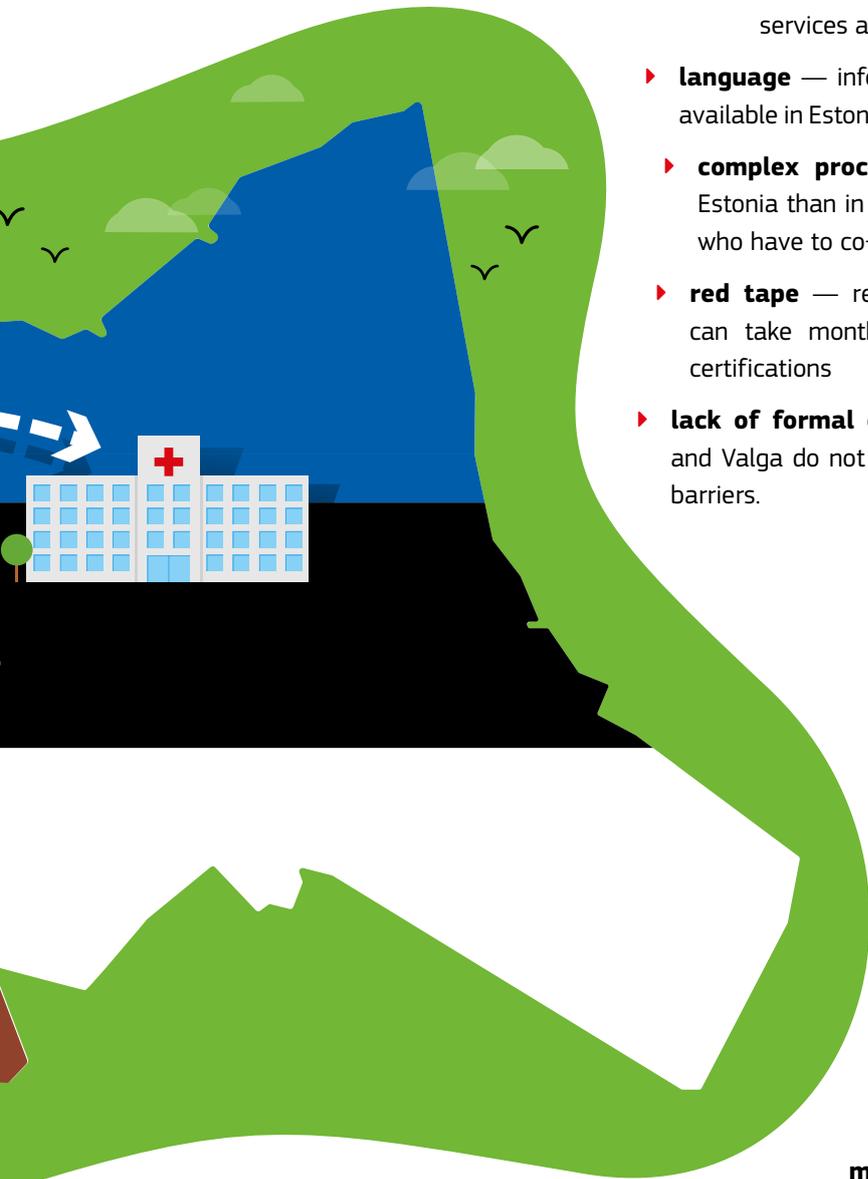




Border barriers

Obstacles to cross-border healthcare include:

- ▶ **lack of information** — how to make use of medical services abroad and get reimbursed, for example
- ▶ **language** — information about access to medical services is not available in Estonian in Latvia and not available in Latvian in Estonia
- ▶ **complex procedures** — services are twice as expensive in Estonia than in Latvia, resulting in financial burdens for Latvians who have to co-finance treatment received there
- ▶ **red tape** — referrals and documents when seeing specialists can take months and involve costly translation and notarial certifications
- ▶ **lack of formal cooperation mechanisms** — officials in Valka and Valga do not have formal ways to help citizens overcome the barriers.



Right to cross-border care

The EU has enshrined in its legislation the **right of citizens to go to another country for medical treatment** and be reimbursed for it. But research has shown that cross-border healthcare is **underused** and that, due to limited access to information, there is a general lack of knowledge among patients about their rights for reimbursement.

In border regions, **administrative and legal obstacles** in accessing healthcare services lead to negative consequences for the well-being of local residents. It can also impact the attractiveness of the area as a whole, especially for the elderly and people with special needs. This, in turn, can **fuel inequalities between border regions** and other parts of a country.



Valga, Estonia



Area:

16.54 km²



Population:

12 632



Medical services available:

The town is served by the AS Valga Haigla (Valga Hospital)



Valka, Latvia



Area:

14.36 km²



Population:

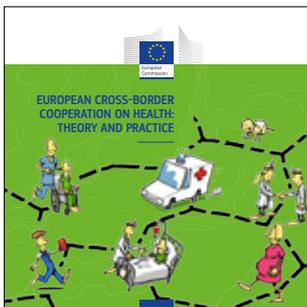
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Medical services available:

The closest Latvian hospital is situated in Valmiera, some 55 km from Valka. Its emergency service is closed on public holidays and is difficult to reach by public transport in the evenings and on weekends.

Health knows no borders



Health knows no borders. This means that a patient should be able to go to the closest hospital, even if it is located in a different country.

Cross-border cooperation on health is a way of **managing shortages and failings – or of taking advantage of opportunities.** In this respect, cross-border regions are like a laboratory where two, three or even four national regulations, cultures and health systems meet.

For more information, please check out the brochure 'European Cross-border Cooperation on Health: Theory and Practice': <http://europa.eu/MX44jk>

More information

Communication 'Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions': <http://bit.ly/2v5u4PK>

The Cross-Border Review: <http://bit.ly/28h802K>

The full case study: <http://bit.ly/2wdiNgD>

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