

Effects of 'covidfencing' in European cross-border regions: an initial overview

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Note: Based on data collected from the CoR COVID-19 exchange platform and other sources

1. The main effects of a covidfencing era in Europe:

1.1. Social domain

By and large, the widespread concerns and needs for sharing social-health equipment and services dominate this social domain of CB relationships in Europe, presented in the obtained data. This clearly relates to the specific constraints associated with the need to treat the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, this could also signify that the European border barriers have been gradually reduced in the CB use of health facilities, added to an increasing interdependency of social-health workers crossing the border on a daily basis. This is true for several European borders. However, it looks particularly evident in the older CB areas (Benelux + France + Germany). Indeed, in this regard, the Luxemburg covidfencing experience unveiled a highly dependent health system on CB workers, representing around 70% of Luxemburg's medical staff, mostly coming from France. In this context, the Luxembourg government considered introducing certificates to enable CB commuters to settle in its territory as a solution for the sustainability of the Luxembourg health system. This, of course, raises concerns on the other side of the border (mainly France), as the Grand Est Region has been one of the regions in France most affected by the COVID-19, and could soon lack medical staff. By the same token, the health care system and some social services in certain German regions depend on workforce coming from eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland. Therefore, intensive discussions were held to develop special regulations for important medical staff to cross the border and stay in Germany (Saxony offered 40€ per day to medical staff).

Although not revealed in the CoR platform, reliable information from the INTERACT Vienna coordinator (Bernhard Schausberger) presented another salient example of the national health system dependency on CB health workers: in this case, the Austrian hospitals' dependency on medical staff

from surrounding Eastern European nations. Similarly, the French-Swiss border remained open to CB workers who are considered essential to the economy of the Swiss border cantons, which include the medical sector. Conversely, political differences between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland present an eloquent example of how complicated the management such a health crisis can become. Such examples show an urgent need for a coordinated approach between CB regions and states in managing health crises, and to set up structured cooperation processes in the field of public health in the near future.

In the midst of the covidfencing panorama, there have been some local and regional actions with the goal to mitigate the novel CB barrier to people circulation all across Europe. For instance, a contact group was set up between the Grand Est Region, the regional Prefecture and the three German Länder along France's border, on 16 March, the date on which the border between France and Germany was closed. The main goal of this initiative was to get information about the restrictions on free movement and their impact on CB workers in this CB area. Later expanded to include the regional health agency, the French border departments, the German health and police authorities, the German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the French Ministry of the Interior, this facilitated the forging of a joint response to the health emergencies in the CB area. At the same time, it enabled the transmission of information related to difficulties linked to crossing the border, both by economic players and citizens. Also remarkable was the strengthening of the collaboration in emergency medicine, internal medicine, and pneumology between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, which was facilitated by the existence of a common legal framework for emergency situations/disaster areas. Furthermore, the Hospital de Cerdanya/Hôpital de Cerdagne (ES-FR) was not greatly affected by the covidfencing panorama. Instead, a sound collaboration between local border police forces has led to the establishment of a green lane to allow both the Hospital's workers and patients to cross the border when needed.

CB health solidarity in Europe can be illustrated with several examples, such as the sharing of infrastructure and sharing equipment. For instance, a German hospital (the SHG-Kliniken Voelklingen) in Saarland, close to France, Belgium and Luxembourg, decided to admit COVID-19 patients from France who needed critical support. This German solidarity was extended, for instance, to the Free State of Saxony, which donated 100,000 masks to the Lower Silesia (PL) partner region and accepted to test 3,000 medical samples from Polish citizens for COVID-19 in its hospitals. In the same spirit, the Romanian government sent protective equipment and health products to the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, the Luxembourg Hospital Federation mobilised its members to receive patients from France and the Greater Region. A similar decision was made by the Swiss hospitals which received French patients seriously affected by COVID-19.

This CB health support also emanated from ongoing CBC projects (the ENI CBC P-Belarus-Ukraine programme provided ambulances and respirators to hospitals); private initiatives (one Belgian company has donated 30,000 empty bottles to the University Hospital in Lille - FR); actions by CBC entities, the Bánát Triplex Confinium (BTC) EGTC in the Hungarian-Romanian-Serbian tri-border region, mounted an effort to deliver urgently needed face masks and hand sanitisers); and existing CB protocols to use health facilities. For example, one of the exceptions in the Portuguese legislation to allow border crossing to Spain was due to the need to use CB health facilities; and authorities in French and Belgian Ardennes are in continuous contact on the need to share health facilities.

As regards social security related issues encountered by CB commuters, around 4,000 Belgian self-employed CB workers in the Netherlands have encountered new obstacles for which no solution has yet been found, in spite of a BE-NL (North Rhine) task force being developed to solve the problem. In the Spanish-French border, certain problems have been encountered by families in need of economic aid, due to lack of coordination and information, and because people from border regions have been forgotten in the midst of the global pandemic. Worse still, in the Portuguese-Spanish border area, many CB employees have been suspended or temporarily laid off.

Indeed, covidfencing in Europe has not only triggered the awareness of how important the permanent functioning of CB public health services is, but also worsened the socioeconomic situation in several CB areas that rely on maintaining regular CB commuter flows. For instance, in the Frankfurt (Oder - DE) and Słubice (PL) CB area, some of the around 20,000 Polish workers crossing the border to work in Brandenburg and Berlin (DE), decided to move to and remain in Germany after the closing of the borders on 27 March. This was mainly due to the problematic quarantine obligation by Germany for everyone coming from abroad. This covidfencing situation eventually led to protests on both sides of the border at the end of April. In the meantime, the Polish government exempted people from crossing the border for professional, business and commercial reasons due to quarantine obligation (4 May 2020).

The effects of covidfencing on CB commuting have extended to most European borders. In view of this, the mayors of the Spanish and Portuguese municipalities that make up the seven Eurocities located in this particular CB border area, expressed their concerns on the covidfencing effects, and requested opening additional border-crossing points (only seven were open), as well as additional funding to alleviate the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis in these particular areas. For instance, in Extremadura (ES) the fact that only three CB border crossings were open, obliged some people to make 170 kilometre detours to cross the border, instead of the usual 15. The economic effects of these measures are yet to be known, especially when around 1,000 vehicles were prevented

from crossing the border from Badajoz (ES) in one month, May 2020. A similar situation happened further north (Norte – Portugal (PT) and Galicia - ES), where 27 CB passages are usually open. These were reduced to only two, due to covidfencing, leading to previously unheard of traffic jams longer than two hours, and a reduction by half of the usual traffic. In this context, which greatly affects around 805 CB SMEs, the local EGTC presented a joint investment plan until 2027, in order to boost CBC.

Further east, on the Romanian-Hungarian CB area, vehicles have had to wait for some 3-4 hours before crossing the border. On the Hungarian-Serbian border, this is a common reality in the summer, but currently it is even worse. Likewise, in the DE-FR CB area, many of the around 45000 CB workers have been prevented from crossing the border, since many small border crossings have been closed due to lack of border control personnel. This local context has led to discriminatory attitudes towards CB commuters by some CB inhabitants, afraid of being infected. Worse still, in the Northern Ireland-Ireland CB area the challenges and uncertainties resulting from the Brexit implementation process have been exacerbated by the new covidfencing panorama. All these examples present clear signs of 'too much reaction and too little action', showing a need to emerge from the crisis in a more coordinated manner.

This need for coordination is already evident in several of the European CB areas. For instance, in the Zeeland-Flanders (NL-BE) CB region, the mayors of four border municipalities, together with the EGTC Linieland, have contacted national authorities to solve various problems faced by commuters when crossing the border, by requiring commuters to simply sign specific agreements. Such agreements exist, for example, for Slovakian CB commuters (living and working within a maximum of 30 kilometres from the border), who are required to identify themselves with an employment certificate and a residence card. The Slovak government eased the limitations for commuters (within a 30 kilometres zone from the border line) from 28 April. This was done in response to an online petition signed by more than 11,000 persons, to counteract an earlier provision obliging a negative COVID-19 test not older than 30 days, paid by the commuter, which had affected several tens of thousands of persons commuting across the Hungarian, Austrian and Czech borders every day. The easing resulted in allowing their crossing without test and without a threat of a compulsory quarantine. A similar protest took place at the Polish-Czech border in Cieszyn. Here, pressure was placed on the Polish authorities to urgently open the border for 12,000 CB workers. Being a central European country with seven national borders, Hungary has changed its provisions to manage border crossings on a daily basis. Taking into account that the number of border crossings is very low between Hungary and Croatia (seven in total, with an average distance of 52 kilometres between them), the two countries were able to ensure the availability of enough border staff to keep

open all the crossings for commuters. In the case of Slovakia (with 35 border crossings) this was not possible since the two countries, currently, do not have enough human resources. Consequently, just a limited number of crossings have been open for commuters and the transport of goods.

In another example of civic and local participation, 11 municipalities in southern Slovakia wrote a letter to the Prime Minister asking the Slovak government to review the border crossing restrictions between Hungary and Slovakia as soon as possible, in order to ensure the possibility to meet their relatives living on the other side of the border. A similar initiative took place in the French-German CB area, where numerous political and civil society related initiatives were launched to improve the situation of border commuters. Just as in the previously mentioned examples, the local EGTC (Eurodistrict Pamina) led some of these initiatives, thus contributing to the pooling of local forces. However, the fact that this border was not totally closed for the transport of goods and CB workers shows the national authorities' awareness of the importance CB commuters in the regional economies in this part of Europe. As potential solutions to encountered problems, Germany and France agreed to maintain employment contracts of CB workers, to extend teleworking possibilities beyond 25% of the employee's working hours, and to guarantee all social protection rights and full remuneration.

These measures are particularly important for the 45,000 workers of the FR-DE CB area, among the more than 360,000 CB workers commuting from France. There was also an agreement about teleworking for the border with Luxemburg, safeguarding the status of CB workers on this border. But it has to be noted that the extension of teleworking on this border may provoke perverse effects in France. Workers, instead working for French employers, may prefer to telework for Luxembourg employers with higher wages. As explained before, in this case, Luxembourg gets the income tax, and does not share it with France. This situation is legal, as states are sovereign for their taxation policy, but sub-optimal, as it creates an unbalanced cross-border situation. A better situation would be created by the option of co-development, where Luxembourg would contribute, either through financial compensation, or directly co-funding CB investments. This typically shows how CB socio economic integration requires more political cooperation. This scenario is not so pleasant for some Italian CB workers, who may soon have to provide themselves with three separate national authorisations, because of the need to cross more than one border to arrive to their working place in Monaco.

1.2. Physical domain

The lack or reduced CB accessibility is regarded by Europeans as one of the five most relevant border barriers to their daily lives. Foremost among these is the reduced capacity of CB public transport in view of the CB commuters' needs (Medeiros, 2019b). As such, the stories provided on this particular domain of deTerritorialism are an overall testimony of the negative effects of covidfencing in most European CB regions. The following are concrete examples: (i) the Nouvelle-Aquitaine Euskadi Navarre Eurorégion where the CB railway has ceased to work; (ii) the halting of all CB public transport between Italy and Slovenia; (iii) the lack of available CB public transport between Germany and the Czech Republic until early May 2020; (iv) the temporary suspension of the Chaves (PT) Verín (ES) CB passenger transport service (the TUT); (v) the significant reduction of CB public transport in the French-Belgian CB area; (vi) the impossibility for the Strasbourg Transport Company to serve Germany via the tramway going from Strasbourg (FR) to Kehl (DE), which now stops at the borderline; and (vii) the reduction in frequency of the Franco-British ferry crossings. In detail, the DFDS company has decided to limit the number of passengers per crossing by 50% in order to provide sufficient social distance, and to reduce the risks of transmission, until at least 6 April. A similar measure has been taken by Eurotunnel for its freight shuttle.

1.3. Economic domain

In the end, covidfencing will inevitably provoke economic setbacks in all European CB areas, as it affects all CB flows, directly or indirectly. It is with no surprise that several measures have already been put in place to mitigate economic problems in European CB areas. For instance, the Bayonne Pays Basque Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Gipuzkoa Chamber of Commerce and the Navarre Sodena Economic Development Agency have eased lockdown measures by supporting CB business and technological centres in the Spanish-French CB area. Similarly, in the Italy-Albania-Montenegro CB area, SMEs' competitiveness has been stimulated through the creation of 'Fertilization and Innovation Labs in Agro-food'. In the same manner, two EU EGTCs (Pamina: FR-DE and GO: IT-SI) contributed to speed up economic integration in their CB areas respectively by developing pilot initiatives in the Karlsruhe Technology Region, and by proposing the promotion of CB development measures once the emergency ends.

As regards measures to enhance information and technology in covidfencing times, the Eurometropolis Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai has created a dedicated section on its website, of successful CB initiatives and best practices being implemented across the French-Belgian border. For their part, the Pyrenees-Mediterranean Euroregion is supporting SMEs in the areas of innovation, the environment and climate change, higher education and research, tourism and culture. Also important

is the creation of a Cross-Border Information Point (CBIP) for Chaves (PT) and Verin (ES) Eurocitizens, which brings together important guidance, information and resources on the state of emergency in both countries, in order to help people working in this CB area.

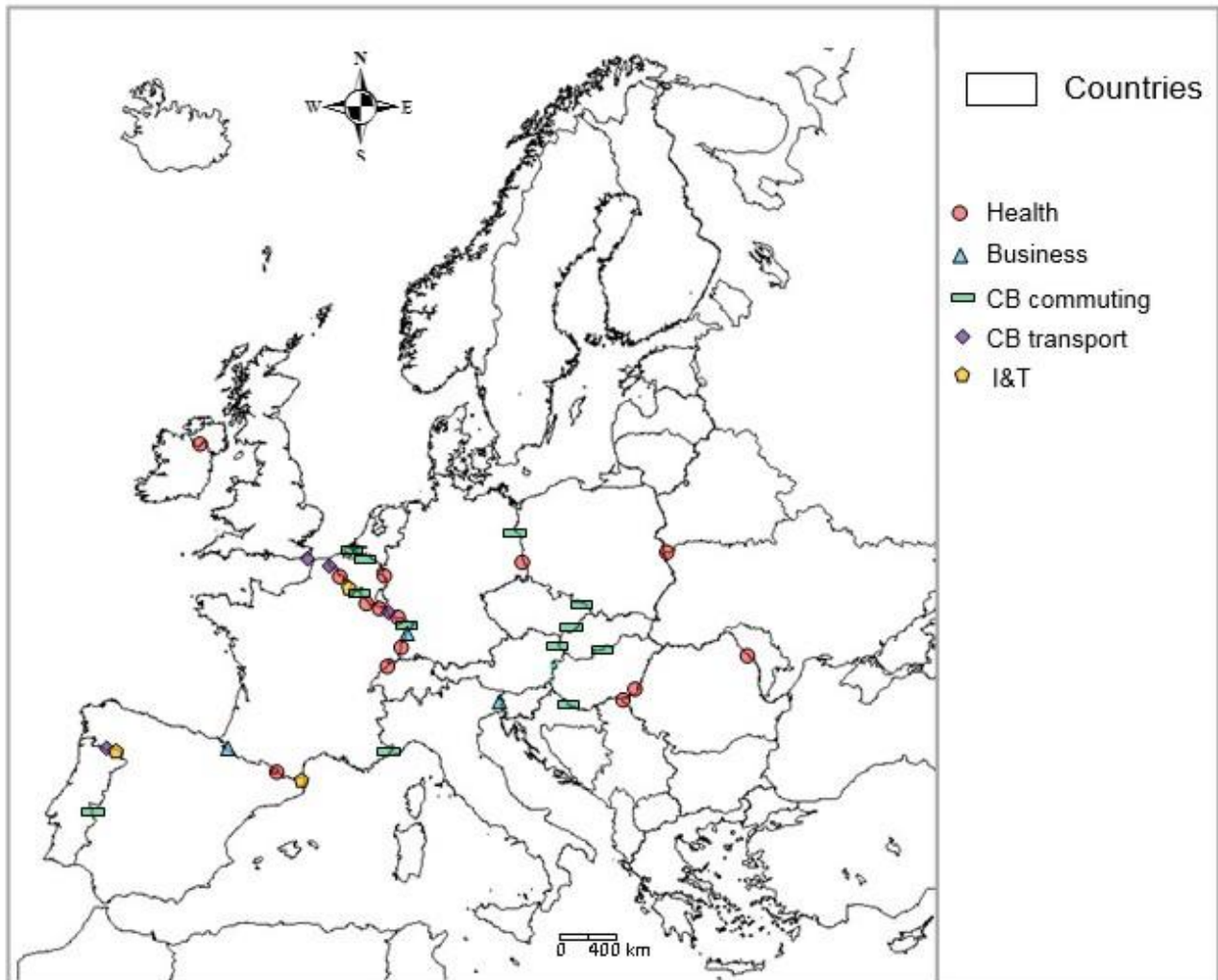


Figure 2. Themes covered by the CoR platform #EuropeansAgainstCovid19 in Europe. (Own elaboration)

A Scandinavian case (Swedish-Norwegian border - closed on 15th March), provides an eloquent example of how covidfencing has affected CB economic activity. Specifically, the CB shopping malls on the Swedish side were, by late May, completely empty, whereas grocery stores on the Norwegian side are booming and doubling their turnover. In all, most of the previous examples confirm a recognition by national, regional and local European authorities of the deTerritorialism benefits in crucial CB territorial development arenas in many EU border crossings (Figure 2). Fundamentally, some public services (mainly social and health) require an open border scenario to operate normally. Moreover, several economic activities are largely dependent on CB workers, and

the closing of several CB road and rail passages has greatly affected their movement across the border. What is also obvious from the examples above is the need to improve current CB public transport services, as most have either been stopped or significantly reduced in their daily frequency, as a consequence of covidfencing.

2. Potential covidfencing territorial impacts in the barrier effect of EU CB areas

The previous section presented arguments on how covidfencing in the European CB areas can provide an understanding of the current degree of deTerritorialism, in certain parameters, in Europe. On the one hand, this degree was seen to be relatively high in CB commuting and the use of some CB public services, following from a systematic European integration process (de Wilde, 2019). As expected, this integration is higher in some (older) EU CB areas, which is logically positively correlated with the degree of deTerritorialism. This reality provides a case to argue that the covidfencing territorial impacts are especially high in the European CB areas where the deTerritorialism process is less advanced, in other words, where the barrier effect in all its dimensions is higher.

With this hypothesis in mind, this paper used a tested and sound TIA methodology, TARGET_TIA, to assess the potential ex-ante impacts of the EU CBC processes in five specific dimensions of the barrier effect in the EU CB areas (current Interreg-A V programmes area: (i) accessibility - Fig. 1; (ii) institutional cooperation - Fig. 2; (iii) economic cooperation - Fig. 3; (iv) social cooperation - Fig. 4; and (v) cultural cooperation - Fig. 5). The results obtained shed light on the degree of deTerritorialism of the analysed dimensions, thus providing the EU, national, regional and local entities crucial data to direct a targeted investment to increase the border permeability in one or more of these barrier-effect dimensions. The reading of the respective figures with the cartography of the impact scores, provide the following main conclusions:

- Accessibility: the use of data which correlates the demand vs the provision of CB public transport (Medeiros, 2019b) shows that the CB accessibility in this particular domain is, in general, relatively low across the EU CB areas. This is particularly evident in CB crossings such as the Polish-Czech CB area;
- Institutional cooperation: the contrast between North and North-West Europe and the other European territories is clear with regard to the degree of CB institutional cooperation. This is a result not only of the older (since the mid-1950s) formal CB arrangements in these CB areas (Perkmann, 2007), but also from the gradual implementation of the Interreg-A Community Initiative + European Territorial Cooperation programmes since 2007;

- Economic cooperation: based on data showing where the potential economic effects of opening the borders are higher (Capello et al., 2018). Needless to say, the EU CB areas where CB economic cooperation is higher are those where the economic barrier effect is more significant.
- Social cooperation: supported by recent data collected on the presence of CB public services in Europe (ESPON, 2019), the TIA analysis outlines certain EU CB areas (Baltic countries, Austria, Spain and Hungary) which could benefit from investment in such services to increase the level of social cooperation;
- Cultural cooperation: supported by data collected for an EC report (Gramillano et al., 2016), the analysis identifies several Eastern European CB areas (as well as some in Scandinavia and the Iberian Peninsula) still requiring the mitigation of substantial cultural barriers.

In sum, it is possible to verify a mixed reality in which CB economic cooperation contrasts with the other five CB barriers analysed, making it difficult to fully confirm a homogeneous deTerritorialism degree in the EU CB areas. Even so, for the most part, the data used show the need for increasing the investment of future EU CBC programmes (i.e. Interreg), in particular, in policy areas such as institutional, social, and cultural cooperation.

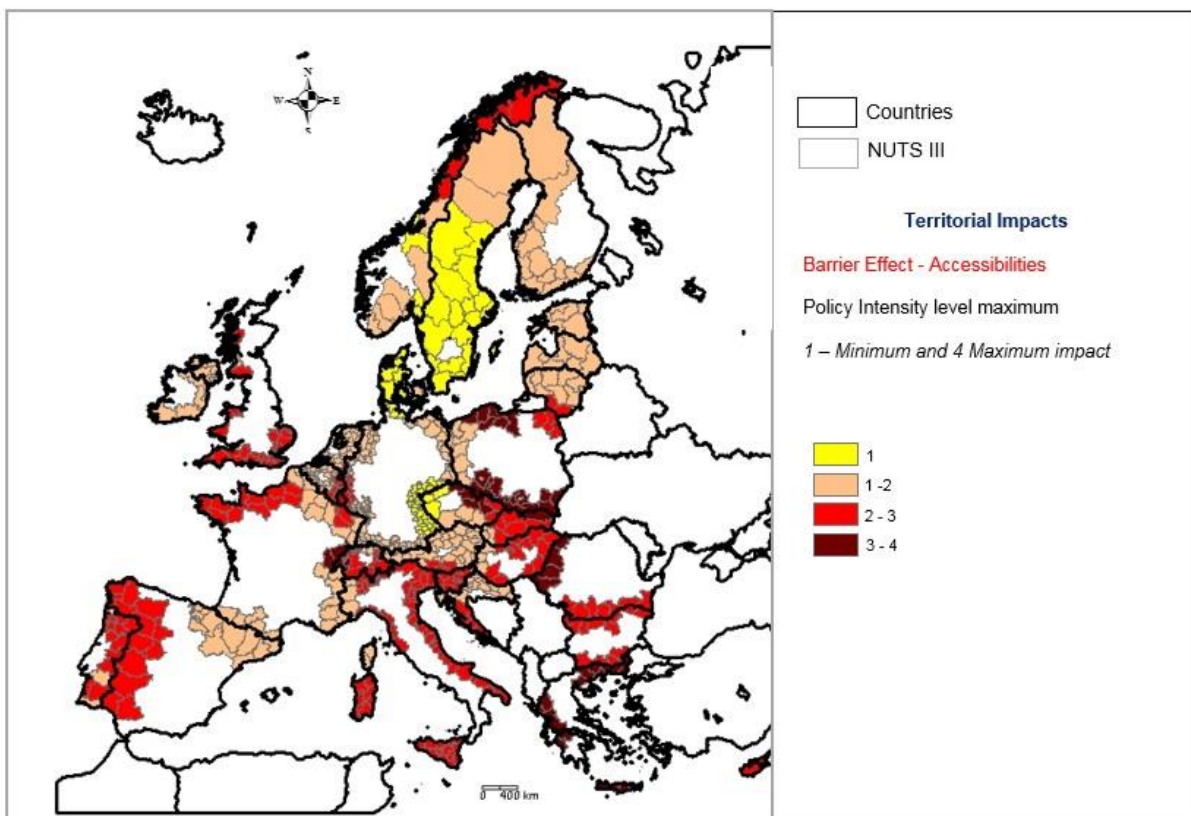


Figure 1. Potential covidfencing impacts on CB accessibility in EU border regions

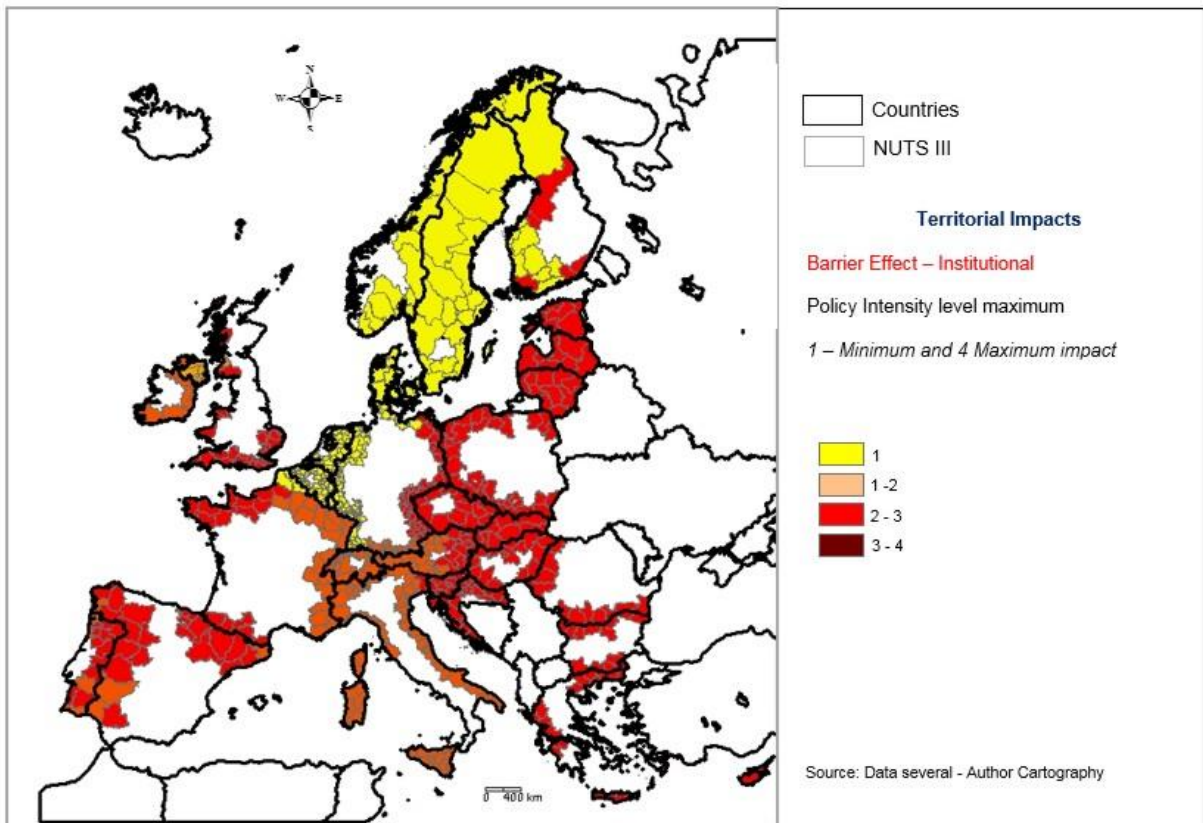


Figure 2. Potential covidfencing impacts on CB institutional cooperation in EU border regions

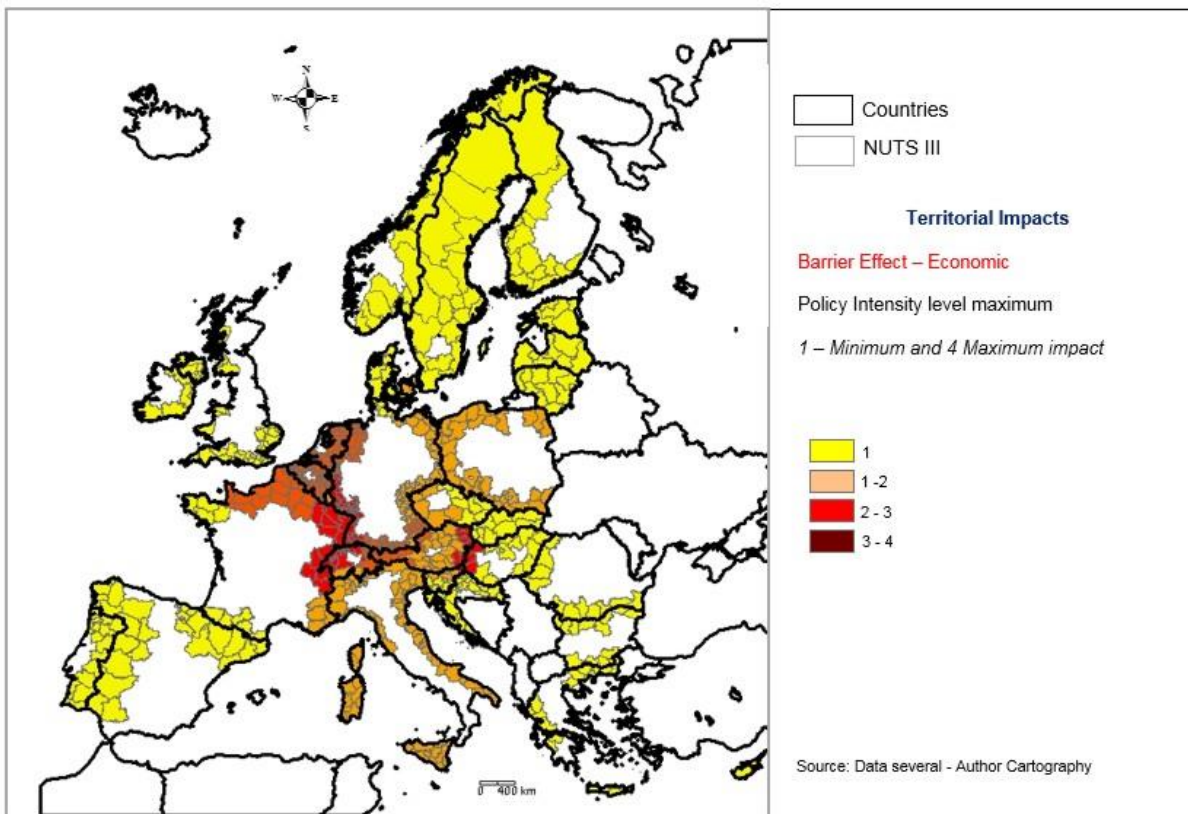


Figure 3. Potential covidfencing impacts on CB economic cooperation in EU border regions

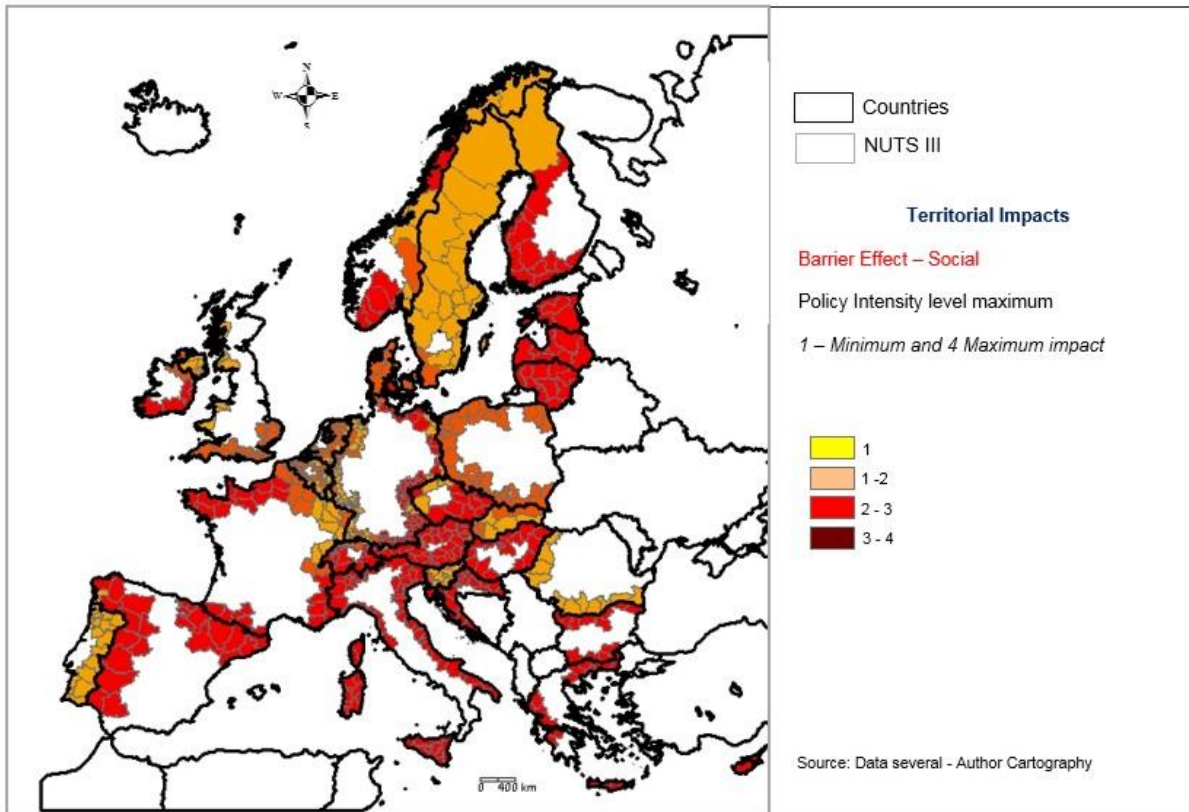


Figure 4. Potential covidfencing impacts on CB social cooperation in EU border regions

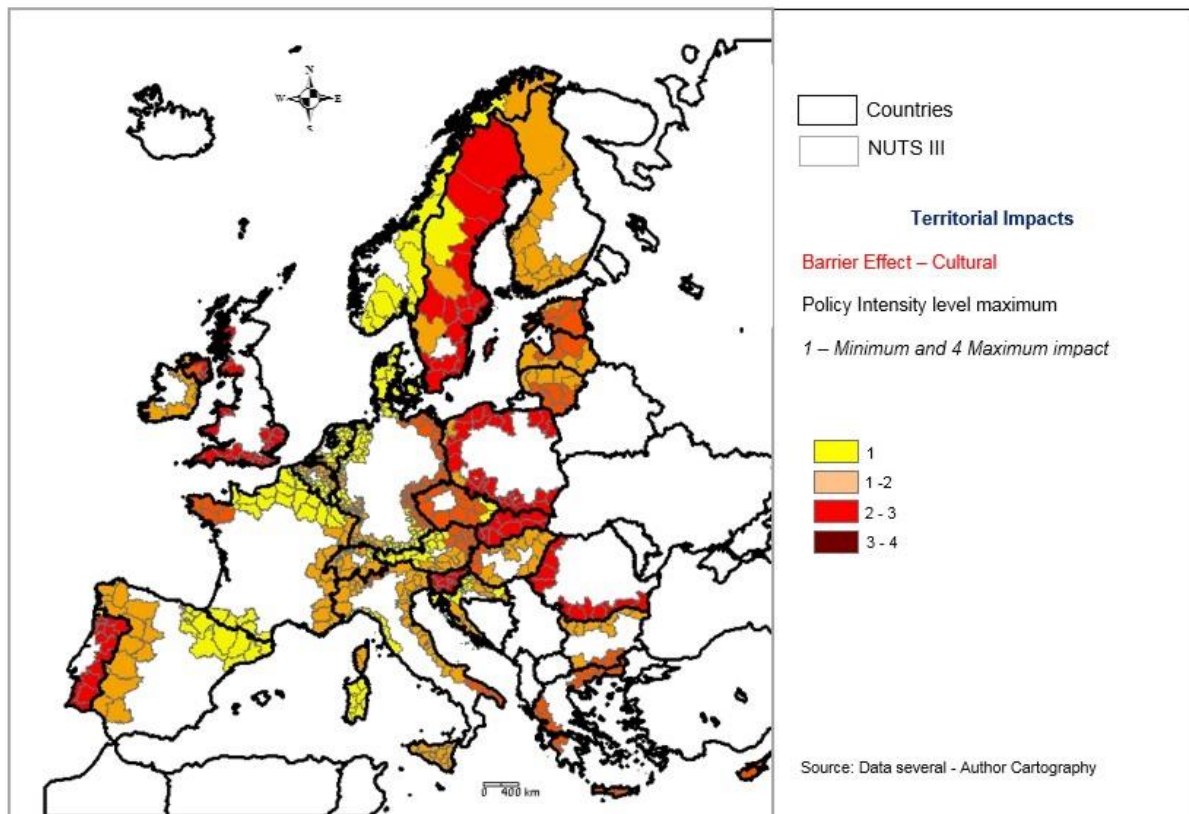


Figure 5 - Potential covidfencing impacts on CB cultural cooperation in EU border regions