

**REPORT**

The impact of the closure of Minho border  
due to the COVID-19 crisis

OMBUDSWOMAN  
OF **CROSS-BORDER CITIZENSHIP**  
Eurocity Cerveira Tomiño



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## INTRODUCTION

The Cross-border Ombudswoman of Cerveira-Tomiño has the function of <<ensuring the defense and execution of the rights and private interests of Vila Nova de Cerveira and Tomiño residents as European cross-border citizens before the municipal bodies and services of Vila Nova de Cerveira and Tomiño>>.

The Ombudsman was created in 2017 within the framework of the Strategic Agenda for Cross-border Cooperation Cerveira Tomiño, 75 % co-financed by the INTERREG VA POCTEP call, EU FEDER funds. The initiative is part of the actions of “dynamization of the strategic agenda” and it is, specifically, aimed at promoting cross-border public participation. Since 1<sup>st</sup> July 2017 its ombudswomen are the Galician, Zara Pousa Arbones and the Portuguese, Maria de Lurdes Guerreiro Pereira Cunha.

According to the Letter that rules its operation, the Ombudswoman performs her duties by the means of a claim, complaint or on self-initiative whenever she has knowledge of a fact that justifies her intervention, including among others the following competences:

- a) To receive claims, complaints and suggestions regarding the cross-border relations between the municipalities of Vila Nova Cerveira and Tomiño;
- b) To issue reports, recommendations and suggestions within the scope of her competence, addressing them to the Cerveira-Minho Strategic Management Committee.



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Throughout the years, the Ombudswomen have developed an agenda of contacts and meetings with several social institutions and disseminated their functions through media channels, organization of events and through the Eurocity webpage. This latter contains a specific informative section about the Institution, its Charter of Principles and Access Procedure: <https://eurocidade-cerveiratomino.eu/valedoras>

In December 2018, the Ombudswomen issued a report recommending the removal of barriers to cross-border mobility of children and young people as this was one of the main obstacles to unite residents and suppress physical and psychological frontiers. The report, which was presented in February 2018, had a great repercussion and allowed the European Commission and the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) to establish, in 2019, possible alternatives to this problem on their B-solutions program.

The International Observatory on Democratic Participation (OIDP), based on the labor of the Ombudswomen, awarded the Eurocity Cerveira-Tomiño with the prize Good Practice in Citizens Participation in 2019.



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## **BORDER CLOSURE DUE TO THE COVID 19 SANITARY CRISIS**

The evidence of common historical background between Galicia and Portugal highlights the current good social, economic, administrative and commercial relationship. In this context, new local cross-borders entities, like the Eurocity Cerveira-Tomiño or the AECT Rio Minho, promote the union of populations separated by merely 200 meters wide of the Minho River, contributing to the establishment of an Eurocitizenship and "social tax free zones " with more equality and better quality of life.

Citizens have been following these institutional processes pleasantly. The good assessment results taken from the 2018 cross-border cooperation questionnaire in our Eurocity are a prove of that. (<https://eurocidadecerveiratomiño.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/enquisa-servizos.pdf>).

In this context, the closure of the border during the COVID 19 Sanitary crisis has significantly changed the life of the Galician-Portuguese border residents like we have never seen in the past 30 years, truncating their daily lives by half.

In order to gather and issue all the damages caused, the Ombudswomen set up mechanisms to collect information that now sum up the casuistry that implied the closure of the border on a territory, whose social life has already transcended, according to the logic of European coexistence, the artificial division of belonging to two EU member states.

The data were collected through personal testimonies, newspaper articles, cases reported by email and through a questionnaire (attachment) posted on Eurocidade Cerveira-Tomiño Facebook page from 28th to 31st May 2020. So far, more than 250 cases of people affected directly the this closure have been reported.



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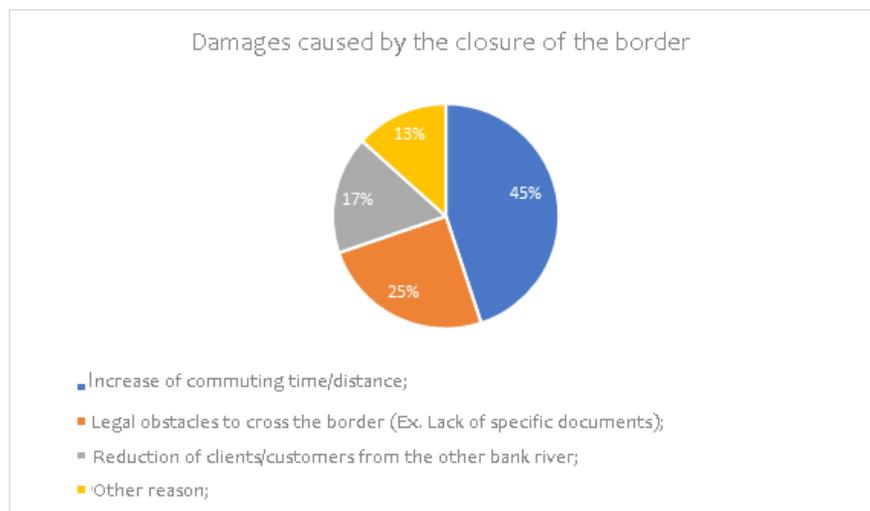


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## Border closure: a setback on cross-border citizenship

The testimonies and data collected allow us to conclude that the two months of border closure implied an unprecedented change in people's daily life, affecting negatively on the development of its economic and social activity.



Among the main damages referred, we highlight:

- 1) a change in the flow and working activity of cross-border workers due to the limited border-crossing points. The closure of the bridge Ponte da Amizade between Goián-Tomiño and Vila Nova de Cerveira affected negatively their mobility, leading to an increase of distance, time and commuting costs to get to the working place.
- 2) Economic losses caused not only by the limitation on working and trade relations that lead to a reduction of up to 70% of clients/customers, job losses and lack of supplies/good in some businesses, but also caused by the extra costs in terms of renting of a second house or commuting through the only border-crossing point open.



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3) Inability to use some essential public services located on the other side of the border, like educational services (education) or health services (vet and medical appointments).

4) Unavailability to use sports, business or cultural services/ equipment accessible on the other side of the river.

5) Serious struggles for families to cope with and family care (families separated, elderly people unattended...).

We come to the understanding that these results, along with other reports like the Socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Cross-border Rio Minho Territory issued by Universidade de Vigo to the AECT Rio Minho and Deputación de Pontevedra, must be taken into account by the local, autonomic, state and European authorities to:

- Diminish these damages immediately,
- Promote specific aid and recovery measures for the territory and
- Adopt unique operational mechanisms for Eurocities in order to avoid future senseless and damaging situations as the ones experienced in this crisis.

Eurocity Cerveira Tomiño

11th June 2020, 16th anniversary of the opening of Ponte da Amizade



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