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Faraway so close: cross-border migration in the Euro-region Galicia-North of Portugal and the unmet expectations of an easy socio-cultural integration

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We'll be hearing a lot in this panel about ways to cope with diversity in order to foster social integration in pluralistic societies. My take on the issue is somewhat different. I'm interested in how to cope with assumptions about sameness (strong cultural ties and similarities across international borders), when these assumptions lead policy makers to overlook or underestimate existing obstacles to mobility and integration for cross-border commuters or frontier workers in border regions.

My claim is that this is what happens in the border region between Galicia, in Spain, and the North of Portugal, taken in a broad sense to comprise the region from Ferrol-La Coruña to Porto.

After Spain and Portugal became EEC member states, in 1986, and with the “de-bordering processes” brought about by European integration, the cross-border cooperation between the two states increased significantly. In particular, the economic cooperation in the Galicia-North of Portugal region grew very rapidly, not only in commercial exchanges but also in the interdependence of both productive systems.

Also, the political relations between the regional and local authorities on the two sides of the border have consistently been deemed to be excellent and there have been many public displays of cross-border cooperation. It is often pointed out that the cross-border relations are more intense between Galicia and the north of Portugal than in any other part of the Portuguese/Spanish border. Galicia stands out among the Spanish Autonomous Regions

for privileging economic and development cooperation with the north of Portugal rather than with other Autonomous Regions in Spain. The recurring explanation for this privileged relationship is the existing historical and cultural (linguistic) ties, and the similarities, between the two regions.

This privileged relationship has led over time to the institution of a number of cooperation platforms, aimed, one way or another, to foster workers' mobility and social cohesion within the region:

- 1) In 1991, a Working Community for Galicia-North of Portugal was established under the framework of the Council of Europe 1980 Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities. The Working Community lacks legal personality and is used mainly for the purpose of applying to EU funding for cross-border cooperation initiatives.
- 2) In 1997, within the EU framework, a EURES cross-border partnership was established to promote cross-border mobility of workers in the region. The EURES network provides information, advice and job-matching services, besides providing help to workers and employers alike in solving problems related to cross-border commuting, including guidance on the rights and obligations of workers living in one country and working in another¹.
- 3) In 2008, a European grouping of territorial cooperation was established by the Xunta de Galicia and the Commission for Regional Development and Coordination in the Region of the North of Portugal, under the framework of Regulation (EC) No. 1082/2006 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC). The EGTC has legal personality. One of its stated purposes is to

¹ The EURES Galicia-North of Portugal partnership is involved in a series of initiatives aimed at facilitating cross-border mobility for workers and employers in the Galicia-North Portugal Euro-region, changing this geographical area into a single job market. Since the partnership's inception, the following has been achieved: 1) creation of a network of EURES Advisers, specialists in cross-border and transnational mobility from the various partner organisations (Xunta de Galicia, IEFP, Universidade de Vigo, University of Minho), who provide jobseekers, workers and employers in the Galicia-North Portugal border area with placement services, information and advice; 2) production of documentation and information on matters specifically related to cross-border mobility (social security, taxes, unemployment, recognition of qualifications, setting up one's own business, etc.); 3) running of cross-border vocational-training courses for the unemployed; 4) analysis of data on the needs of the cross-border labour market, the cross-border flow of workers, and obstacles to mobility; 5) the setting up of permanent working groups, composed of executives and specialists from bodies such as Social Security, the Labour Inspectorate, to spot obstacles to mobility and implement the measures needed to overcome them.

strengthen the economic and social cohesion of the region and to promote employment.

The cultural and linguistic affinities between Galicia and the North of Portugal are expected to facilitate the ongoing efforts to foster social cohesion in the Euro-region and to change this geographical area into a single job market. However, in the past 30 years, the social and cultural integration in the Euro-region has advanced at a much slower and uneven pace than economic integration, which was very fast and very significant. Mixed marriages are still relatively rare and there has been little progress in mutual knowledge about the language and culture of the neighbouring countries. Furthermore, the border (*raya/raia*) is still present in the imagination of the populations of the region, especially on the Portuguese side, where there is still a will of independence vis-à-vis Spain and a perception of threat (nowadays, mostly economic) from the Spanish neighbour.

The fact is that, in many ways, the cross-border relations in the Euro-region of Galicia-North of Portugal are asymmetric. The commercial exchanges between Portugal and Spain are uneven, as Portugal is more dependent of Spain than the other way around. Also, regarding the migrants' profiles, Galician migrants residing and/or working in the north of Portugal tend to be high skilled (e.g. physicians) whereas Portuguese migrants in Galicia tend to be low skilled and recruited to work in construction sites and agriculture. A recent poll conducted by the EGTC about the perceptions of the populations on both sides of the border about the Euro-region signalled an overall impression that Galicia is much more developed than its Portuguese counterpart.

So, if we look at migration flows in the Euro-region, we should not be surprised to find the same type of obstacles to mobility that are found in other border regions in the EU. These obstacles have to do, mostly, with:

- Complexity of the legal framework under which cross-border migrants move, work and stay in the Euro-region, covering aspects such as social security, taxes, unemployment, recognition of qualifications, etc.;
- Lack of awareness by cross-border workers of their rights (in spite the efforts by EURES);
- Protection gaps in the access to health care and social security systems;

→ Problems with the recognition of qualifications (a major focus of concern for the Euro-region in recent years);

→ Lack of effective coordination of supervisory authorities and inspectors on both sides of the border to prevent and detect abusive working conditions.

What do we know about migration flows in the Euro-region?

Not much, actually. It remains to be made a thorough inventory of the labour migration between the north of Portugal and Galicia, through parochial, municipal and police registries, as well as entrepreneurial records, especially in the agricultural and construction fields. The official data does not allow us to quantify the number of cross-border migrants in Galicia, and the same is true for Portugal.

Cross-border regular labour migration between Galicia and the north of Portugal has a long history, going back at least to the XVII century. Since the accession of Spain and Portugal to the EEC, in 1986, and the “disappearance” of the border, migration across the border has intensified and become a permanent (daily) feature.

Recent reports by Portuguese and Spanish academics have focused on the Portuguese labour migration to Galicia (less focus on the current traits of the inverse route, however). Portuguese are the largest group of foreign workers residing in Galicia and Galicia is the Autonomous Region of Spain with the largest number of Portuguese residents. It has been noted that, for Portuguese migrants, migration to Galicia is an “internal migration” as opposed to migration to overseas territories and northern Europe.

Academic focus has been drawn in particular to the discrimination and exploitation faced by Portuguese cross-border workers (mostly working on construction sites and commuting to Portugal for the weekend). The legal framework covering these workers is extremely complex, combining EU law, Portuguese Law, Spanish national law, regional law for the Autonomous Region of Galicia, and the specific provincial regulations within the autonomous region of Galicia, since each province has its own agreements between the employers, the unions and the government for the construction sector. Information available points to a frequent disrespect for these agreements and state legislation in general, with discrimination against Portuguese workers, who work more and are paid

less than local workers. Portuguese workers are usually recruited by intermediaries (often Portuguese national) and hired in Portugal, under Portuguese standards regarding salaries (lower than in Spain), and then the intermediaries keep the difference between Portuguese and Spanish salaries to themselves. Portuguese workers do not benefit from Spanish law and are not registered in the Spanish Social Security; this means that Portuguese workers injured in Spain have to be taken to Portugal to get health assistance. It is also reported that Portuguese workers arrive in Galicia without knowing the salary that they will perceive, work 12 hours per day, only get payed overtime beyond 10 working hours, etc.; there are also reports of bad housing conditions. The supervisory authorities for work conditions on both sides of the border do not cooperate among each other.

Portuguese workers residing in Galicia are less affected by discriminatory practices, but even here the prospects for socio-cultural integration in Galicia fall short of what would be expected. The numbers of mixed marriages are low and the same is true for the numbers of naturalisations, which hinders the access to full political rights, for national and regional elections.

All, cross-border commuters and residents, are exposed to a range of negative stereotypes (stupidity and laziness, among others), which hinder Portuguese workers' chances of integration into Galician society.

Portuguese working in Galicia, in spite of sharing with Galician locals a background of cultural and linguistic affinities and a supranational framework of EU citizenship, are still not treated equally to the local citizens and are vulnerable to disenfranchisement, especially in the labour market and the political field. Furthermore, the fact that Portuguese are paid less and work more hours creates obstacles for solidarity among Portuguese and Galician workers (who perceive the Portuguese as responsible for the wage drops) and hinders the prospects of forging a common identity and social integration in the Euro-region.

So, as Arias Fernandez noted in 2012, the border is still very much there.

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