



Study on providing public transport in cross-border regions – mapping of existing services and legal obstacles

Case Study report

Bus line Verín (Spain) – Arcos de Valdevez (Portugal)

Contract: 2019CE160AT093



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1. Introduction

This case study report presents the business model for the cross-border public bus service between Verín (Spain) and Arcos de Valdevez (Portugal). This report is part of a series of 31 case studies developed in the framework of the study 'Providing public transport in cross-border regions – Mapping of existing services and legal obstacles'. Spatial Foresight in cooperation with TCP international, TRT trasporti e territorio and EureConsult completed this study for the European Commission's DG REGIO.

The case studies highlight a variety of business models for cross-border public transport services. This includes governance arrangements and operational provisions to develop the service and address demand in border regions. These aspects will be introduced in section 2, as well as the territorial scope of the service. Section 3 presents key obstacles related to the business model as well as solutions. Section 4 is about lessons learnt from this case.

This case study shows the service of Flixbus, the most prominent commercial bus company of Europe, offering a cross-border bus service as part of a long-distance line. The case examines how the Flixbus business model relates to the territorial context in a cross-border region and why there is room for a wider and better suited public service offer to satisfy local demands.

2. Features and benefits of the service

Among its wide range of services, Flixbus offers a cross-border connection from the Spanish Verín to towns in the nearby north of Portugal with the final destination Arcos de Valdevez.

Table 2-1 Characteristics of the business model

Transport service	Verín-Arcos de Valdevez
Mode of transport	Bus
Service provider(s)(operator)	Iberocoach on behalf of Flixbus (private operator under market conditions)
Location	From Verín bus station (Spain) to Arcos de Valdevez bus station (Portugal) with 10 stops in between.
Date when service started	Flixbus started to offer this service in 2017. It was offered by the Flixbus' operating partner Iberocoach already before 2017.

Figure 2-1 Flixbus' operating partner Iberocoach on the Verín-Arcos de Valdevez route



Source: <http://www.iberocoach.com/empresa/>

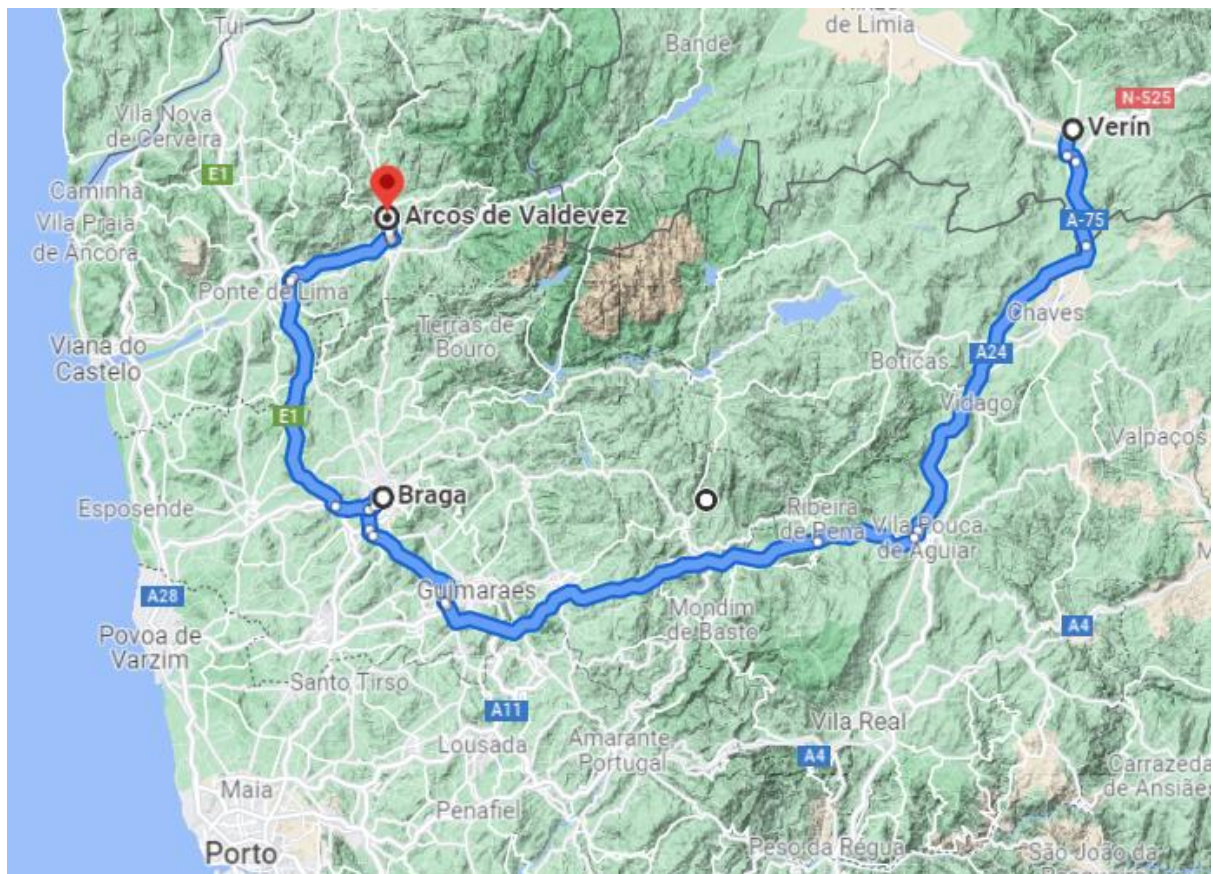
2.1. Geographic context and scope of the service

Verín is a small municipality located in the Spanish province of Ourense in the autonomous region of Galicia, near to the Portuguese border. The population of the municipality is about 14,433. It is located 70 kilometres east of the provincial capital of Ourense and 15 kilometers north of the Portuguese city of Chaves with 44,000 inhabitants. Verín lies in a rural environment. Population density in this rural territory is low. Verín is closely cooperating with the Portuguese town of Chaves in the Eurocity Chaves-Verín EGTC. The border territory of Chaves-Verín is a territorial continuum, administratively separated by the border. From a geographical point of view, it covers a large valley of the river Támega. In 2007, both municipalities created the 'Eurocidade Chaves-Verín', followed by registration as a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) in 2013.

Arcos de Valdevez is a Portuguese municipality with almost 23,000 inhabitants. It is the largest municipality in area of the district of Viana do Castelo.

There is an international bus service that connects Verín and Arcos de Valdevez. It covers a distance of approx. 200 km. The bus stops also in Chaves, thus connecting Verín and its partner town in Portugal, and has nine additional stops in Portugal, including the city of Braga, before reaching its final destination. This bus service is offered by Flixbus and operated by Iberocoach, a regional bus operator.

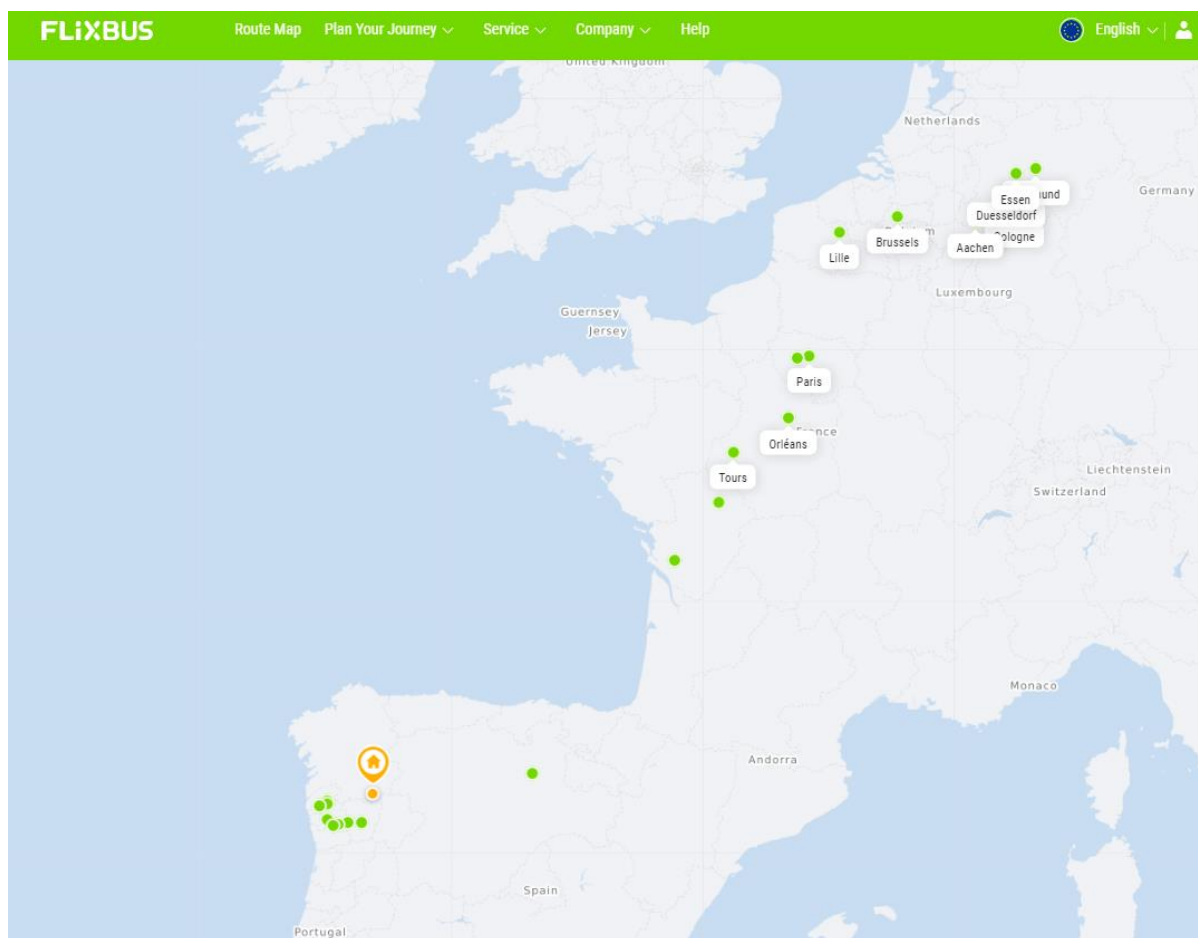
Figure 2-2 Map of the Verín-Arcos de Valdevez bus route via Braga



Source: Google Maps [13 September 2021]

Of course, this route from Verín to Arcos de Valdevez (and vice versa) is only part of larger route network offered by Flixbus. In fact, Verín connects to 25 different destinations in the Flixbus network. With a change of bus one can even reach many more destinations all over Europe. The destinations that can be reached directly are on the route from Arcos de Valdevez to Dortmund (Germany) via Paris, Brussels and Cologne.

Figure 2-3 Verín within the European route network of Flixbus



Source: <https://global.flixbus.com/bus-routes> [13 September 2021]

The bus service from Verín to Arcos de Valdevez is available three times a week on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. The opposite direction is served on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Thus, there are no pairs of buses on any day that would allow for a day trip across the border.

It has to be noted that legally, Flixbus is not allowed to operate on Spanish domestic intercity or regional routes, as these are considered to be public and organised by public concessions (Flixbus not having a concession for any route). They can only offer transnational and European routes. For travellers from Verín it is technically not possible to book only the route to Chaves, the neighbouring city at the other side of the border. They have to book at least four stops until Vila Pouca de Aguiar. However, no one can prevent a traveller to book the trip until Vila Pouca and leave the bus already in Chaves.

It has to be noted that Flixbus did not plan or created this route in the border area of Verín and Arcos de Valdevez, but rather inherited this line with the new strategic partnership with Iberocoach, based in Verín, who operated on this route before and continues to do so. This probably explains this route to smaller towns in the North of Portugal, while many other international routes mostly connect larger and capital cities.

2.2. Demand for and benefits of the service

The main target group for the Flixbus line passing through Verín are international travellers who come from or go to other European countries and cities via Verín and Arcos de Valdevez or any town nearby. On the partial route between Verín and Arcos de Valdevez, the share of international travellers might be already quite low, while

probably local people travelling in the border area dominate, though no data on the composition of passengers is available.

Most demand on the route Verín-Arcos de Valdevez concentrates on going to the neighbouring towns in this border area, meaning from Verín to Chaves and from Chaves to Verín. Some people from Verín, including tourists, might choose to go to the larger city of Braga or to one of the other stops in Portugal, including the final destination of Arcos de Valdevez. No further data is available for demand on the complete route Verín-Arcos de Valdevez.

Studies (ETT, 2012) have shown that many Spanish and Portuguese citizens in the Verín-Chaves area have daily and frequent interactions with the other town which require cross-border mobility. People cross the border, for example, to study, work, use a basic service (hospital) in the other country, go to a market or shop, for leisure or sports activities or to jointly enjoy local fiestas and cultural events. While there are no concrete figures of flows available, the experience shows that people move for multiple reasons and in both directions. "There is the so-called "Carro da compra transfronterizo" (cross-border shopping trolley). The Portuguese buy chocolate, hygiene and cleaning products and petrol in Spain, while the Spanish buy rice, vegetables and furniture in Chaves. They do this almost every day or when they take advantage of a getaway. They also do so at work. And contrary to what it might seem, many more residents of Chaves work in Verín than vice versa." (Andaluz, 2020)

It has to be noted that there is no regular bus connection between the neighbouring towns of Verín and Chaves. Despite some occasional bus connections that started in recent years (e.g. only on weekends, or when there are local fiestas), cross-border travel can be characterised as follows:

- Mainly private cars
- Good connection by roads and an existing highway
- Low use of public transport
- No regular bus service in the border area
- No cross-border coordination between regional transport authorities (Xunta of Galicia and CIM Alto Tâmega)
- Lack of coordination of timetables.

For more than a decade there have been attempts to establish regular cross-border public transport (e.g. ETT, 2012). The goal always has been to promote initiatives for cross-border mobility, as an aspect of economic, social and territorial cohesion.

Benefits of a cross-border service would be:

- Consolidate the north south inner axis of the Galicia Norte Portugal Euroregión
- Increase cross-border labour mobility
- Improve access to healthcare for cross-border population (complementarity of Chaves and Verín hospitals)
- Consolidate the tourist destination by facilitating the cross-border flow of tourists

Information on mobility flows is limited as national observatories only control traffic and flows within national territories but recent surveys have determined a demand for cross-border transport. Figures on movements in general are based on older data from 2001 and amount to a total of 90,901 essential movements per day in the whole cross-border region (i.e. Chaves and Verín districts). The majority of the population moved either by private car (50-60%, depending on the territorial area, Chaves, Verín-City or Verín rural district) or on foot/by bike (34%-44%). Only 3% (Verín rural district) to 14% (Chaves district) used public transport (ETT, 2012). In 2009, the cross-border flows between Chaves and the County of Verín were an estimated 798 trips on working days, and 646 on weekends. These would be mostly in private vehicles (ETT, 2012).

Therefore, there is local and regional demand for cross-border mobility which usually is by car. Given the established routines of going by car and the relatively low demand for cross-border public transport, resulting from these routines, as well as legal and administrative obstacles, it took several years to establish a bus line between Chaves

and Verín. In 2019, it was finally possible to launch a free-of-charge service as part of an INTERREG project to test the demand.

The aim of the Eurocity Chaves-Verín is to connect the Portuguese and Spanish transport networks, coordinating existing services at the border. While waiting for a regular bus connection, the Eurocity EGTC identified the following challenges that persist in the border region (Rivera, 2019):

- How to ensure mobility and access to services for an isolated and ageing population in cross-border regions?
- How to take advantage of new technology and new mobility models in a sparsely populated border region such as the Eurocity Chaves-Verín?
- How to achieve cross-border coordination in the planning and provision of passenger transport services?
- How to overcome border obstacles to implement a cross-border public transport service between the two cities?
- How to improve access for Chaves (Portugal) to the new Madrid Galicia High Speed Train?

While this analysis focuses on the Eurocity Chaves-Verín area, where the demand for cross-border transport may be the strongest, several of these challenges apply also to the whole border area covered by the Verín- Arcos de Valdevez bus line.

2.3. Governance

Flixbus is a German brand that offers intercity bus service in Europe and the United States. It is owned by FlixBus GmbH, based in Munich, which also operates FlixBus and FlixBus. Flixbus started as a start-up in 2012 and has now 1,200 employees in 14 offices in Europe. Flixbus forms a brand umbrella for lines of other bus companies as well as for its own long-distance bus lines. In many European countries Flixbus does not own any buses and does not employ drivers. Its services run in co-operation with regional bus companies. Local partners are responsible for the day-to-day running of routes, while Flixbus is responsible for technological aspects, line planning, pricing, commercialisation, marketing, quality management and customer service. Flixbus retains 25–30% of the ticket price, remitting the remainder to its operating partners. This business model is highly scalable and has enabled the company to grow quickly. (Leman 2019, Herbstreith 2017).

In the last five years, Flixbus has been expanding all over Europe, mainly through the acquisition of other existing companies and through strategic alliances with existing bus operators. In 2016, Flixbus entered the Spanish Market, one year later the Portuguese market. In 2019, Flixbus acquired Eurolines, which was many decades one of the main European operators of intercity bus travel (Leman 2019, Magariño 2021).

According to Flixbus, the company is a combination of technology startup and sustainable long-distance transport operator. Flixbus foresees a strong cooperation model with local bus companies. Flixbus works together with the different administrations and establishes collaboration agreements with a revenue share model with local transport companies, mainly SMEs, which manage the day-to-day running of regular bus lines. (Flixbus 2018)

According to Herbstreith (2017), Flixbus is still in an 'expansion' phase where the focus is on acquiring new lines, adding as many lines as possible and bringing competitors out of the market, either through low prices or strategic acquisitions or partnerships. Flixbus offers prices systematically lower (approx. 30%) than any competitor in order to gain market share. The revenue and risk sharing model foresees that bus operators and Flixbus share the revenues, while the risk is mainly on the bus operator. If the bus is empty, the bus operator makes no business. Flixbus guarantees to its bus partner companies a fixed price of EUR 1.10 per km. However, if this EUR 1.10 is not already reached through the share of the ticket price, the bus operator only receives the rest as "liquidity assistance", as a loan.

In 2018, they had already 5 SME partners and more than 30 international lines in the Iberian Peninsula. In 2019 the fleet consisted of a hundred vehicles for 38 international routes. For 2021 they foresee to have 150 buses, from its various partners and not owned, to cover a total of 60 routes between Spain and seven European countries. Their goals include strengthening the Mediterranean corridor and the entire domestic bus network in Portugal, launched in summer 2020 (Magariño 2021).

Today, the private bus operator Socitransa, under the brand name of Iberocoach, with its headquarters in Verín, is one of the Iberian bus operating partners working for Flixbus in Spain and Portugal (Flixbus, 2017). Until 2017, the lines in the border area between Galicia and North of Portugal and to other towns in Spain and Portugal were operated by Socitransa/Iberocoach. So far, apparently nothing has changed for travellers and workers in Socitransa/Iberocoach, apart from now operating under the name of Flixbus, connecting to the overall Flixbus route network and having access to the overall flixbus partner network.

Critics indicate that Flixbus continues operating below cost-covering prices to become the dominant provider in the market of intercity bus travel in Europe, including domestic lines (Doll, 2016). Expecting that at some point they have to increase the prices or reduce costs to become profitable, this can have quite some negative effects on smaller lines in regions with less critical mass of travellers, such as the Spanish-Portuguese border region. One possibility is that at some point in the future, local and regional transport providers will be either dependent on Flixbus or will have ceased business. If Flixbus decides to cancel a route in a border area with less critical mass of travellers, this will have a severe impact on the territory, in case no other transport providers are available or able to cover the routes.

2.4. Operational provisions

The line Verín-Arcos de Valdevez is operated under the name of Flixbus by Iberocoach which is owned by the Spanish bus company Socitransa.

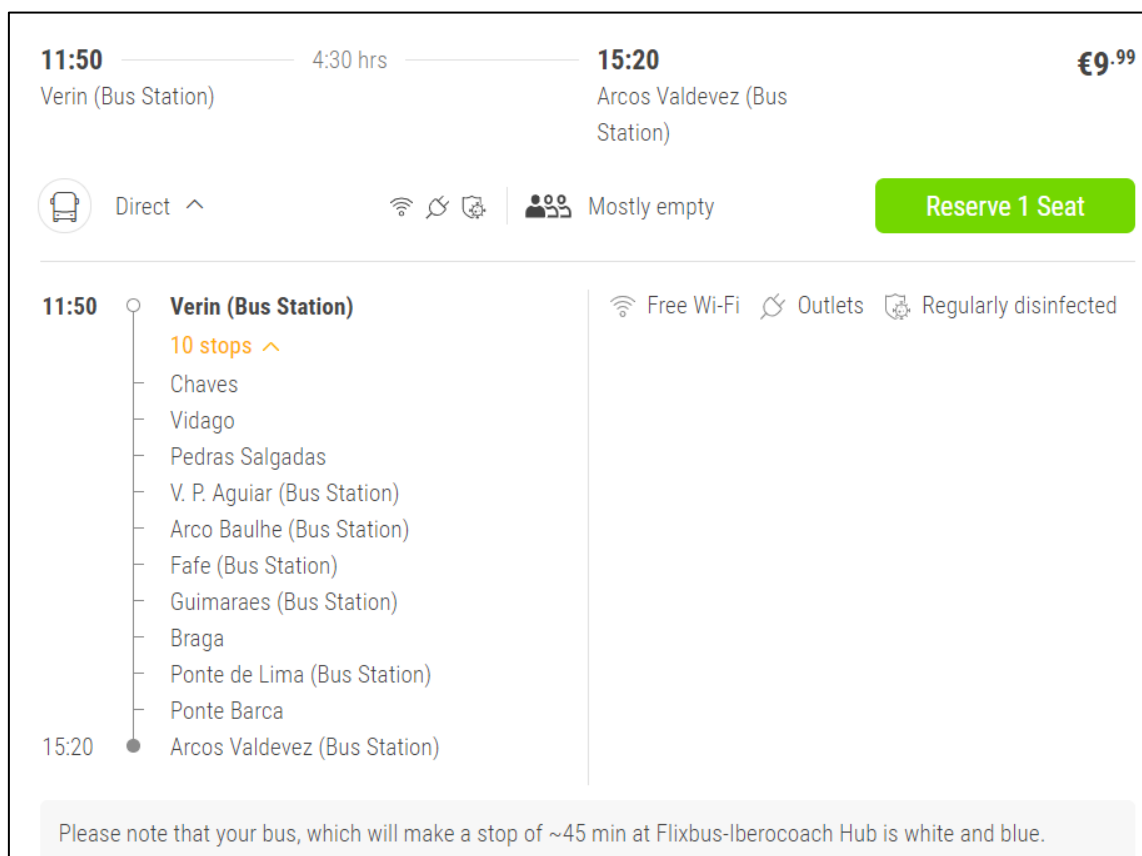
Booking is possible via the Flixbus website and app. Tickets are also sold at the bus station. Iberocoach also offers online booking, but not for the part of the route Verín-Arcos de Valdevez (or shorter).

The bus service from Verín to Arcos de Valdevez is available three times a week on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays, leaving in Verín at 11.50 a.m. (Spanish time) and arriving in Arcos at 3.20 p.m. (Portuguese time) after 4 hours and 30 minutes of travel. When going from Arcos de Valdevez to Verín, the bus leaves at 8 a.m. and reaches Verín at 1.35 p.m., with service every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

The ticket costs EUR 9.99 which is, as mentioned before, quite cheap for such a long trip and in line with the overall bet of Flixbus for low prices. However, compared to specific offers from Flixbus to stimulate the demand after the COVID-19 induced freeze of the market in late 2020 (Spain to Portugal for EUR 0.99 in autumn 2020, Magariño, 2020), this is even expensive. It is one of Flixbus' characteristics that they work with algorithms and constant real-time analysis of demand and offer and adjust the prices accordingly.

If a traveller from Verín wants to go to the neighbouring town of Chaves, as mentioned before, she or he has to book at least until Vila Pouca de Aguiar and then leave the bus already in Chaves. The ticket would cost in this case EUR 5.99. This seems quite high for a trip to the neighbouring city that takes 50 minutes. But given that there are no other regular public line connecting Verín to Chaves, this might be at least an additional opportunity for travellers without private car and certainly cheaper than a taxi. The drawback for cross-border connections is that the service only runs three times a week, and that travelling back, from Chaves to Verín, will not work in the same way, when booking needs to be from another Portuguese town (at least 4 stops from Verín).

Figure 2-4 Verín – Arcos de Valdevez route booking on Flixbus website



Source: <https://shop.global.flixbus.com/> [13 September 2021]

Flixbus and other European intercity bus operators work with a system of international hubs and feeding lines. For example, a person travelling from Arcos de Valdevez to Cologne in Germany would start the trip in Portugal in an Iberocoach bus. After the first hours of the trip, the bus will stop in Burgos, in the North of Spain, for approx. 45 minutes to allocate travellers from other buses which act as feeding lines for the general routes to all other directions. Probably, the traveller from Arcos will continue travelling in the bus of Iberocoach with other passengers coming from the south of Portugal and Spain. Probably on other stops later, in Bordeaux, Paris or Brussels, there will be again the possibility to change buses for travellers who want to go to other cities. This way of organisation of a spiderweb-hub system allows that many travellers can go with direct or transfer connections to many different cities in Europe without delays and with a harmonised timetable. This is now the operating model of Flixbus but existed already in the past when lines such as Eurolines or Stagecoach offered intercity bus travel in Europe. Flixbus, however, has added the tech portal and the facilitation in booking via Apps, as well as some other novelties in service and operation.

No data is available on the operational provisions of Socitrans/Iberocoach before 2017, so comparison with the past offer is not possible.

Overall, the Flixbus line connects Verín with Arcos de Valdevez and other Portuguese cities in the border area. However, as the line is thought for international long-distance travel it does not serve the local and regional demand for daily cross-border travel of citizens in the border area. However, these connections improve the connectivity for these citizens beyond the immediate border area.

3. Obstacles and solutions

Even if Flixbus/Iberocoach offer a travel opportunity to travel from Verín to Chaves or to other Portuguese towns in the border area, the offer is quite limited and does not meet the demand of local people in the border region adequately.

The reliance on private service providers such as Flixbus bears the risk that, if a route gets less profitable or has proven to be less demanded, the line will be cancelled with no service at all for people in the area. Taking into account that Flixbus marketing concentrates already on the lines that connect large cities with large cities (e.g. Lisbon-Madrid-Paris, Vigo-Bilbao-Brussels) the risk for a route with smaller towns like Verín – Arcos de Valdevez seems imminent. Obstacles do not seem to exist for the operation of this service by Flixbus/Iberocoach. However, in view of this risk, the provision of public services should remain an option in territories such as the Verín-Chaves border area. Keeping the demand of the border area citizens in mind, obstacle analysis may focus on obstacles for designing local and regional public transport addressing the identified demand in the border area.

Regarding the cross-border mobility connection in this border area between Spain and Portugal, in 2019/20, an expert assessment was conducted as part of the b-solutions project (Garayo, 2020). This study identified key obstacles.

The first natural obstacle is the low population density and the naturally low demand for travel to the other side of the border. This hampers the creation of public lines because of the lagging demand and interest in the population. However, several studies (ETT, 2012; EGTC Eurocidade Chaves-Verín, 2019) estimated that the demand for public cross-border transport service between Chaves and Verín would increase, with people replacing private cars with public transport if their demand is adequately addressed, which would mean a steadily increase of passengers for a regular service.

Apart from the low demand for the wider cross-border area beyond Chaves and Verín, the main obstacles are legal and administrative (transport authority and administrative procedures in Spain and Portugal, lack of cross-border management experience in the transport authorities).

The combination of legal and administrative obstacles has so far prevented a regular bus service between the two towns and the surrounding area.

An important part of a solution can be a 2019/2020 pilot bus service provision in the context of an Interreg project which was a useful exercise to test conditions for such a service.

The service of the Chaves-Verín Transfrontier Urban Transport (TUT) connected Verín and Chaves in 2019 and 2020. It was launched in 2019 and continued in February 2020 in the context of an INTERREG project as a pilot action with a reduced frequency during local cultural events and 'fiestas'. The Trans-border Urban Transport Chaves-Verín (TUT) aimed to make a transport service available to Eurocitizens of the Eurocidade on the days of greatest need for cross-border mobility, namely on days when the cities of Chaves and Verín fair and on the days when the main events of the two municipalities take place. The TUT bus service pilot action was implemented under the responsibility of the EGTC Eurocity Chaves-Verín. It was clear that this would only be a pilot action limited in time, free of charge, running as an occasional service on major days of cultural events and weekly fairs. As such it was established and authorized by the corresponding regional and national authorities. For a long time there has been an interest to establish this bus line, but it was only within the context of an INTERREG project, that it became possible. With this pioneering initiative in the Portuguese-Spanish border, the Eurocity Chaves-Verín intended to test and calculate the affluence of transport by Eurocitizens to assess the feasibility of a future regular transport line between Chaves-Verín. A joint legal document was defined to establish the legal framework of the pilot action, called the 'OPERATING REGULATIONS FOR THE OCCASIONAL SERVICE OF CROSS-BORDER URBAN TRANSPORT SERVICE CHAVES-

VERÍN (TUT)'. This document defined on three pages in three languages (Portuguese, Spanish and Galician) the main details of the service and the passenger obligations and rights. The bus service was awarded to two bus companies, one Spanish and one Portuguese, namely Autocares Guerra, from Verín, in partnership with Autoviação do Tâmega, with headquarters in Chaves. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the national border closures until April 2021 any plans to continue or extend the service were abruptly stopped in March 2020. Still, the pilot offers interesting lessons for the local and regional stakeholders to learn more about the concrete demand and continue working on a regular bus connection between Verín and Chaves (EGTC Eurocidade Chaves-Verín, 2019).

Table 3-1 Overview of obstacles experienced

Obstacle	Impact on service delivery	Impact on the cross-border region	Solution introduced / proposed	Level of success of the solution
Asymmetric competences between public administrations	Different legal frameworks, for national and for international passenger transport services and different competence frameworks in Spain and Portugal hamper the creation of an adequate cross-border public bus service.	Impossible to satisfy demand for cross-border transport with public transport. Need to use the car, car sharing services or the private bus, which has, however a very limited service.	Specific cross-border cooperation agreement for transport services where all relevant regional and national authorities agree on the bases of the Valencia Treaty (ES-POR).	Only helpful when relevant authorities already work together and can agree on the creation of a cross-border service. Probably, support (legal, technical) to the local and regional authorities might be needed.
Absence of cross-border coordination in the planning and provision of passenger transport services	Planning instruments do not include any provision for coordination or cooperation in areas close to the border and there is no provision for passenger transport services.	No further planning steps can be taken while cross-border services are not considered in the sectoral plans or specific agreements exist.	Specific agreements (see Obstacle 1) or creation of an additional planning instrument for cross-border transport cooperation. Cross-border dimension in relevant studies.	The creation of an additional planning instrument requires knowledge and capacities to work on the cross-border dimension of public transport. It also requires political agreements on the needs for the border area.

3.1. Asymmetric competences between public administrations

One of the main obstacles is the imbalance of competences between public administrations in the border area of Chaves-Verín, which make negotiations and agreements more difficult. That results from two different legal frameworks, for national and for international passenger transport services. In both Spain and

Portugal, this is due to the absence of a simplified legal regime at EU and national level for cross-border passenger transport services.¹

In Spain, the Autonomous Community of Galicia has the exclusive responsibility for road transport in Galicia. This includes the legislative, regulatory and executive issues. Therefore, in Galicia there is an autonomous regulation for public passenger transport services.

In Portugal, Law 75/2013 on local entities, makes municipalities responsible for promoting and safeguarding the interests of the population, transport and communications. Moreover, Law 52/2015 on public transport passenger services introduced a substantial reform in the passenger transport system, so municipalities are transport authorities for municipal services, and intermunicipal bodies (CIM) are transport authorities for intermunicipal public passenger transport services. As a result, the Comunidade Intermunicipal Alto Tamega (CIM Alto Tamega), made up of six municipalities (including Chaves) is the transport authority in the Chaves-Verín border area.

3.1.1. Impact of the obstacle

The different competences mean that any cross-border local transport requires a complex process of analysing public administration (local/regional) and administrative procedures and proposing new legal ad-hoc agreements. For the moment this would generate a disproportionate workload for local authorities, who usually do not have sufficient legal knowledge, or resources to deal with these cross-border complexities. The b-solution initiative mirrors this difficulty for local authorities and has been used to gain more insights for the border area Chaves-Verín².

3.1.2. Possible solutions

The solution would be a simplified legal regime for cross-border passenger transport services foreseen at national level (in this case for Spain and Portugal). The Spanish-Portuguese Valencia Treaty of 2002 would allow for institutionalised cross-border cooperation agreements for transport services when all regional and national authorities agree. However, this is difficult to push from the local level. A transnational or European interface could help encourage this type of institutional agreement and support local entities.

Additionally, the cabotage exception in EC Regulation 1073/2009 for cross-border urban or interurban public services should be invoked by the transport operator to whom the line to be extended has been awarded³.

3.2. Absence of cross-border coordination in the planning and provision of passenger transport services

Planning passenger transport in the Eurocity region of Chaves-Verín is the responsibility of the transport authorities. The planning instruments do not include any provision for coordination or cooperation in areas close to the border and there is no provision for passenger transport services, so no further steps can be taken to develop this service. This is a vicious circle (Garayo, 2020).

¹ See Garayo, 2020 for the detailed description of this obstacle.

² <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>

³ See solutions proposed by Garayo, 2020.

3.2.1. Impact of the obstacle

The Public Transport Plan of Galicia is limited to the Autonomous Community and does not incorporate any cross-border scope.

As in Spain, Portugal's law does not cover cross-border passenger transport planning because there is no legal concept of cross-border transport, only of international transport as noted above.

The resulting impact is that no further planning steps can be taken while cross-border services are not considered in the sectoral plans.

3.2.2. Possible solutions

An additional planning instrument for cross-border cooperation in the national legislative framework on transport services in Spain and Portugal would help outline the necessary planning steps before incorporating cross-border public service provision into national or regional plans.

An alternative solution would be to allow planning and implementation for cross-border public services within the existing sector plans in both countries, i.e. here for transport services.

Possibly, the consideration of the cross-border dimension in relevant studies on demand and outlook would help to learn more about cross-border demand and to raise awareness on the cross-border demand in the regional transport service planning.

4. Conclusions and lessons learnt

Verín is a small municipality located in the Spanish province of Ourense in the autonomous region of Galicia, near to the Portuguese border. It is located 70 kilometres east of the provincial capital of Ourense and 15 kilometers north of the Portuguese city of Chaves with 44,000 inhabitants. Verín lies in a rural environment with low population density. Arcos de Valdevez is a Portuguese municipality with almost 23,000 inhabitants. It is the largest municipality in area of the district of Viana do Castelo.

A Flixbus bus connection, operated by Iberocoach, is part of a long-distance bus line that connects Verín with Arcos de Valdevez and viceversa. This line offers the possibility to travel from the Spanish Verín to Chaves and to other Portuguese towns in the border area. However, the offer is quite limited (one service three days of the week) and does not meet the demand of local people in the border region. Of course, Flixbus/Iberocoach also designed the service mostly thinking of long-distance European travel and not satisfying local/regional mobility demands.

Verín is closely cooperating with the Portuguese town of Chaves in the Eurocity Chaves-Verín EGTC. In the border area between Verín and Chaves, there have been attempts to establish regular cross-border public transport for more than a decade. The goal always has been to promote initiatives in favour of cross-border mobility as an aspect of economic, social and territorial cohesion. Concrete benefits of a cross-border service would be to consolidate the north south inner axis of the Galicia Norte Portugal Euroregion, increase cross-border labour mobility, and increase the value of the tourist destination by facilitating the cross-border flow of tourists.

The reliance on private service providers such as Flixbus bears the risk that, if a route gets less profitable or has proven to be less demanded, the line will be cancelled with no service at all for people in the area. Taking into account that Flixbus marketing concentrates already on the lines that connect large cities with large cities (e.g. Lisbon-Madrid-Paris, Vigo-Bilbao-Brussels) the risk for a route with smaller towns like

Verín – Arcos de Valdevez seems imminent. In this context, the provision of public transport services should remain an option in territories such as the Verín-Chaves border area.

The establishment of public bus lines between Verín and Chaves has been on the agenda for many years, in particular for the EGTC Eurocity Chaves-Verín for which latent demand for cross-border public transport has been identified. However, legal and administrative obstacles, impeded so far concrete results. Among the main obstacles are: asymmetric competences between public administrations in Spain and Portugal, absence of cross-border coordination in the planning and provision of passenger transport services in both countries, as well as insufficient knowledge of the legal framework for cross-border public transport services.

In 2019 and early 2020, it was possible to launch a pilot service as part of an INTERREG project to test the market. The aim of the Eurocity Chaves-Verín was to connect both Portuguese and Spanish transport networks, coordinating existing services at the border. At the same time, the aim was to help identify and satisfy niche mobility demands (e.g. transport during 'fiestas', shopping, leisure, use of basic services such as healthcare in the other town) (Garayo, 2020).

Unfortunately, the extension of the service in 2020 came to an abrupt stop with the COVID-19 border closures. Still, the pilot offers interesting lessons for the local and regional stakeholders to learn more about the concrete demand and continue working on a regular bus connection between Verín and Chaves. The competent authorities have seen during the pilot action how cross-border transport is possible and are now in charge of the next planning steps. The pilot action has helped to raise awareness of the needs and benefits of a cross-border public transport connection. It has helped to generate knowledge at local and regional level, to connect with other municipalities and stakeholders across Europe in the same situation and to identify the obstacles that prevent the service from being implemented.

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Interviews

Organisation	Interview date
Desk Officer in the EGTC Eurociudad Chaves-Verín	Sent written information on 15.06.2021

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