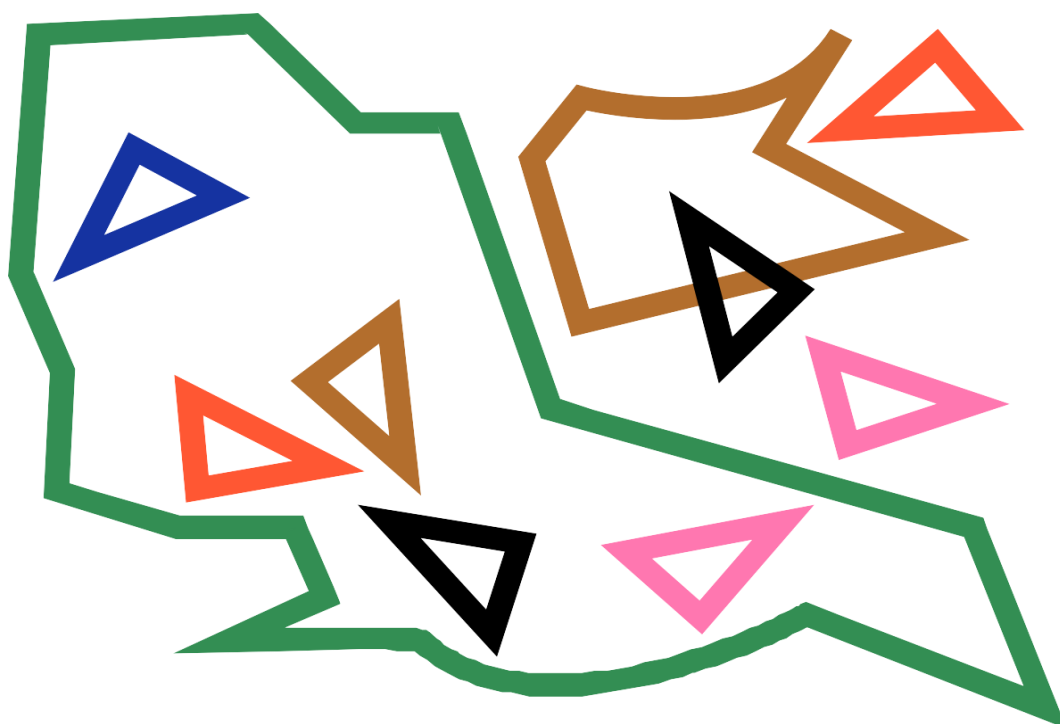


Cooperation and inclusion on troubled borders: Greece-Bulgaria-Türkiye

B-Shapes - Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies



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Executive Summary

B-SHAPES research covered one external border region of the EU: the border between Türkiye on one side, and Greece and Bulgaria on the other. Our fieldwork with the Turkish/Muslim minority in Greece, our border walks, and three policy workshops in northeastern Greece with local stakeholders revealed that these borderlands are different from the others we did fieldwork in. The Bulgarian-Greek border continues to be burdened by its heritage as a closed Cold War border, while the border of both countries with the Turkish republic is heavily militarised and susceptible to the changing relations between Türkiye and the EU. Nonetheless, there have been attempts to improve the situation in the border communities, as well as there is a vivid border economy on the Bulgarian and Greek side of the border with Türkiye.

This Policy Brief is based on our field work (a border walk in the Ivaylovgrad region, a fact-finding visit to minority institutions in Komotini and Xanthi, a workshop and interviews with young members of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace) and the discussions of three policy workshops in Thessaloniki, Drama and Alexandroupolis, with regional stakeholders in cross-border cooperation.

Based on these findings, this Policy Brief recommends that regional stakeholders be encouraged to continue their efforts to build cross-border networks and look for cross-border opportunities, including the Muslim/Turkish community, despite the roaring regional geopolitical situation, and the complicated relationship between Greece and Türkiye



Context

The borderlands this policy brief is based on have a troubled history. Today's border between Greece, Bulgaria and Türkiye dates back to the post-World War I peace settlements and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. This treaty ended the Greek-Turkish war and stipulated a population exchange, requiring Muslims to leave Greece for the Turkish republic, and Orthodox Christians to leave the Turkish republic for Greece. Only two communities were exempted from this drastic measure of religious, but as well ethnic homogenisation: the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul and the Turkish-Muslim community in Western Thrace. After the Second World War, and until 1989, the border between Greece and Bulgaria was a Cold War border, closed for most travels. It was fenced and heavily guarded.

Bulgaria finally joined the Schengen zone in January 2025, resulting in an open border with Greece. The border with Türkiye has been a hot spot of undocumented migration and definite pushes of migrants to the border by the Turkish government, resulting in pushbacks by Greek border guards as

well as FRONTEX involvement and solidarity addresses from the EU (with the Greek government perceiving this migration as a threat).

Otherwise, cross-border relations are kept and even developing. Infrastructure investments will improve connectivity to the harbour of Thessaloniki from both Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The Thessaloniki-Thrace-Edirne-Istanbul corridor enjoys an excellent road infrastructure, which, alas, cannot be said about the more or less defunct railway line. There is a considerable border economy on both the Greek and the Bulgarian side of this border, driven by gambling (Bulgaria) as well as dining and shopping, here mostly electronics and alcoholic beverages.



Evidence, Analysis, and Results

Our research revealed three different but interconnected characteristics of the borderlands:

1. **Landscape:** the Rhodope Mountains and their forests bear traces of the former Cold War border. During the Cold War, it was perceived as less guarded than for example the border through divided Germany, attracting defectors who attempted to cross into Greece. In effect, the border was guarded quite sophisticatedly, and there were incentives for border guards to shoot defectors (extra leave). Until today, the exact number of defectors who have died crossing the border remains unknown and unresearched.
2. **Peripherality:** the region has been characterized by peripherality. Peripherality and low cross-border networks among stakeholders result in a vicious cycle of out-migration and over-ageing. Some rural regions have experienced more than 50% out-migration. Experiences from Western and Northern Europe cannot be simply translated into the Balkans: Balkan border regions are extremely underdeveloped and need comprehensive and tailor-made approaches.
3. **Geopolitics:** a heritage of conflict still impacts the region. Greece and Bulgaria both sought and won (after conflict) independence from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Borders have changed frequently during the late 19th-early 20th century. The Cold War border closure between Greece and Bulgaria had a strong impact on local farming, herding and foresting customs. Special permission was required to enter the border zone in Bulgaria. The communities affected most by these geopolitical problems were the Muslim/Turkish minorities in Greece and Bulgaria. The ethnic composition of the region's population changed drastically: Jewish, Turkish and other ethnicities of the Ottoman Empire migrated, voluntarily and by force. Assimilation policies were implemented in Bulgaria (adopting Slavic names instead of Turkish), while the Greek citizens of Turkish origin are heavily impacted by the trauma of the 1923 population exchange. They were exempted from the exchange, but nevertheless faced with anti-Turkish sentiments in its aftermath.

Greece never implemented European minority protection frameworks and still maintains that there is no Turkish minority, only a Muslim minority, as codified in the Treaty of Lausanne. There are many issues of stigmatization and perceived or real discrimination. The concept of “minority” is perceived as a threat to Greek sovereignty over Thrace, in line with perceived Erdogan government’s aggressive foreign policy. The Cyprus conflict has had an impact, too. Negative developments on the island have resulted in discrimination in Thrace. For example, the prohibition of founding private associations including the word “Turkish” in their name, since Turkey founded the non-recognized client state of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. It was also mentioned that school textbooks used on either side painted a dark picture of the neighbouring countries’ citizens. No agreements on strategies for reconciliation exist.

Greek stakeholders warned about an increasing Euroscepticism in the region. Some expressed a perception of distance with the Western Balkans, Bulgaria and Türkiye as neighbours. There was a perception of Western or European hypocrisy with the de-facto acceptance of the Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus, while Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is condemned and Israel’s invasion of Gaza is tolerated.

A clear backlash is perceived by stakeholders, who described that they did have cross-border initiatives, including projects, and regular workshops and meetings with politicians and other stakeholders from Türkiye. This cooperation started with the MEDA programme, specially when local and regional authorities were invited to participate, though it did not include provisions for cross-border cooperation yet. This cooperation continued with the introduction of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and IPA-CBC in 2007, which made possible the start of coordination efforts across borders such as Spain-Gibraltar-Morocco, Greece-Cyprus and Greece-Türkiye. However, despite the availability of technical resources and political agreements, the evolution in the Southern Mediterranean (Arab Spring) and afterwards the chain of terrorist actions and the refugees crises, COVID, etc, has not made possible a normal operation of these programmes. However, the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue (Barcelona Process) has been strengthened with the participation of local and regional authorities (LRAs) in initiatives promoted by the European institutions. This is not only about funding possibilities (which are also important), but also institutional networks such as the ARLEM, the Euro-Mediterranean Local and Regional Assembly promoted by the European Committee of the Regions which progresses in defining a clearer role for LRAs.

In the case of the GR-TR, the IPA-CBC programmes have been defined since 2007, but was never signed. On the contrary, the BG-TR IPA-CBC programme has been implemented in 2007-2013, 2014-2020, and it is under implementation in 2021-2027.

Furthermore, some of the Turkish mayors who were more active in cooperating with their peers in the EU side are currently imprisoned for political reasons. The lack of the rule of law in Türkiye was named as a central factor making cooperation impossible at the time.

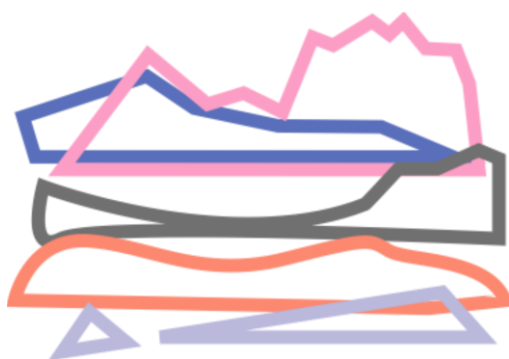
Impact

The impact of these three factors weighs heavily, but there is also commitment to improve cooperation. The rich, shared archeologic heritage in the region points to a common history and the region's interaction with and within the great empires of the past (Alexander the Great's, Roman/Byzantine and the Ottoman empires). The acceptance of this heritage and the opportunities it gave should be a guiding narrative to improve cooperation despite multiple serious challenges. Our informants all expressed hopes and inspiration to work in this direction. It is crucial to focus on the positive European agendas as cooperation and mobility and capitalize on them. Tourism potentials are not fully used (cheaper/less spoiled than most Greek islands and Bulgarian Black Sea resorts). It is important, though, not to equalize peripherality with sustainable tourism, only. There have been and are opportunities for other industries, too (i.e. tobacco production heritage).

While mental borders were stressed by informants, they also believed that the younger generations have overcome these to a certain degree. The open border between Greece and Bulgaria was appreciated. Interreg projects between Bulgaria and Türkiye have also helped to build trust.

Perceptions of peripherality depend on mental mapping. The border city of Alexandroupolis is only 3-4 hours by car from Istanbul and Sofia, less than Athens.

The geopolitical challenges (lack of rule of law in Türkiye, perceived aggressive Turkish foreign policy, migration challenges, lack of recognition of Turkish minority) make cooperation very difficult, nevertheless participants asserted that local communities could work together. Greek participants insisted on the term "Muslim minority" instead of "Turkish minority" but accepted that they are there. Young people experience border regions as nationalistic and have difficulties to reconcile this with their open minds. They are more open to exploring the culture across the border and finding similarities.



Policy Recommendations

- The EU should consider taking the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) into account when designing borderland policies, perhaps combined with Interreg, as many border regions have agricultural mono-structures. A special borderlands agricultural policy might open new perspectives for peripheral border regions lagging behind in socio-economic development. In fact, the AEBR has demanded very strongly to adopt a cross-border approach in most mainstreaming policies, not only Cohesion.
- Regional stakeholders should take into account qualitative aspects of the borderland population as religion and identity when implementing policies such as Interreg.
- Regional stakeholders cannot solve the issue of the legal recognition of the Turkish minority as a national minority, but they can move to cooperate with them and include their associations in planning cross-border activities.
 - Young members of the community are often highly educated and live cross-border lives, interacting with Greek and Turkish people on all levels, perceiving themselves as bridge-builders between the different communities.
- We recommend remembering previously existing cross-border networks between regional stakeholders in Greece and Türkiye (Euroregion Evros-Maritsa-Meric (GR/TR/BG), Euroregion TrakiaKent (GR/TR/BG), and the Black Sea Euroregion (AM/AZ/BG/GE/GR/MD/RO/RU/TR/UA) to be revived if/when the political situation will change.
- Regional stakeholders should remember the importance focus on the local cross-border perspective, instead of the difficult geopolitical perspectives they will not be able to solve
- Engage young people, give them responsibility and resources!
- The newly established AEBR Task Force Cross-Border Business/SME in border regions could serve as a best practice example: it empowers local stakeholders from different European border regions and encourages them to think across borders, and network with other border regions.

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