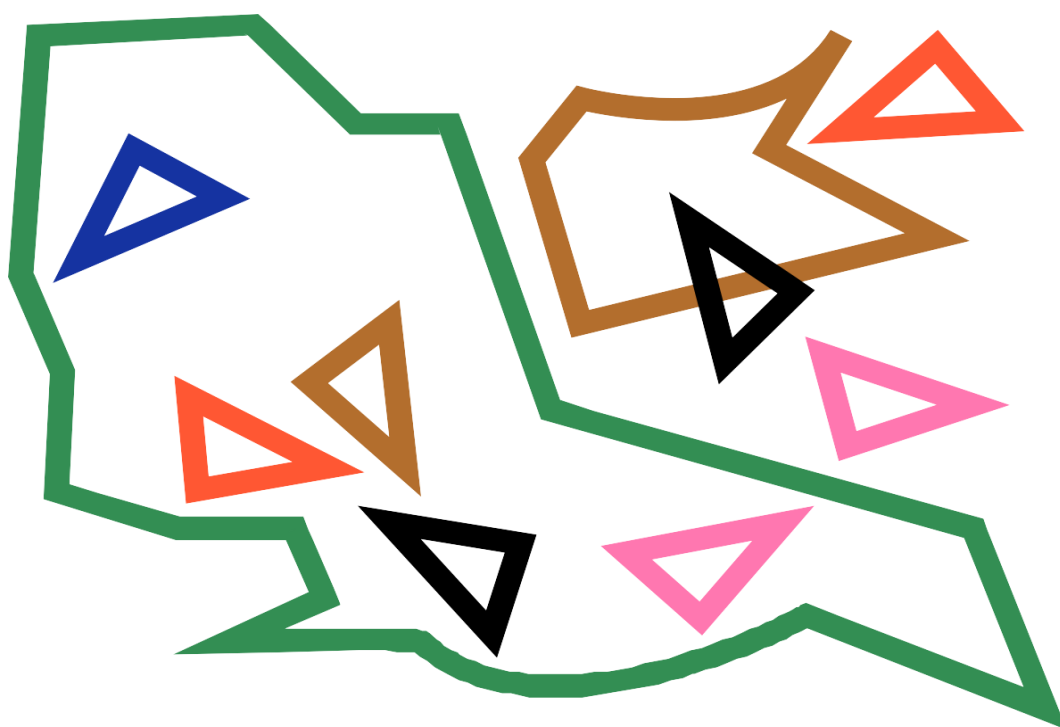


Policy Brief # 4

Cultural and cultural heritage policies affecting borderlands

B-Shapes - Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies



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Executive Summary

Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies (B-SHAPES) is a Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Action project analysing and assessing how borders still are a key factor in how we understand societies. Eight European universities, one research institute, a national museum, a foundation, a political association, a consultancy, and an art collective have come together for three years¹. The special border region focus promises new insights into how borders shape perceptions of societies, but also how the story of borders can be narrated differently than from a purely national perspective.

This policy briefing paper is the fourth in a series which B-SHAPES produces in order to summarise and disseminate key findings from the research in a way which can support an evidence-informed approach to policy debates and offer considerations for policymakers and those interested in the role of borders in a wider context of EU Cohesion policy and practice.

The 4th B-shapes Policy Brief focuses on borderlands as shared (European) heritage sites and the extent to which that is taken into account in cultural policy and cultural heritage policy. While policymakers aim to frame borderlands as reconciliation spaces, this sub-study of the B-shapes project finds that national, regional, and local policies often overlook their unique cross-border cultural dimensions. National policies frequently lack relevance to cross-border cooperation, while regional and local policies show inconsistent engagement. Recognised national minorities often drive cultural initiatives, but these are primarily targeted at the minorities and their cultural connections with their kin-state. Policies tend to prioritise economic benefits, such as tourism, over fostering shared cultural identity. Stakeholder engagement and alignment with EU frameworks vary widely, with some regions focusing on sustainability and digitalisation. Recommendations include fostering cross-scale cooperation, leveraging both national and new minorities, integrating youth perspectives, and enhancing EU-level collaboration.



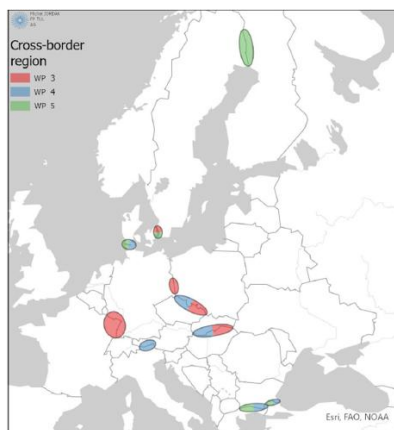
Context

Borderlands are recognised sites of shared heritage, but they are also sites where the difference between “them” and “us” often becomes extra visible. Globally, heritage can be politicised, positioned as a point of differentiation or contested in an international relations context, even though policymakers make growing efforts to emphasise borderlands as reconciliation spaces. Additionally, and in contrast to approaches which are more bordered, UNESCO World Heritage at a global level continues to consider and support a range of transboundary site designations, many of which involve close cross-border collaboration between neighbouring states and transnational cooperation for long-term conservation and stewardship of shared natural, built, archaeological and cultural heritage resources. At the same time, border experiences are often crucial in debates about where the nation ‘begins’ and ‘ends’ – not just spatial-territorial, but also otherwise: linguistic, symbolic, and cultural. Previous research has shown that perceptions of borders as meeting places play a marginal role in the catalogue of European or national heritage catalogues. This may well be symptomatic of a broader phenomenon: national territorial policymaking rarely automatically has a transboundary or cross-border element as a routine practice. However, in heritage terms, no previous research has assessed a broad European set of contemporary cultural policy and cultural heritage policy documents from a border regional perspective. B-shapes emphasises the importance of the borderlands’ cultural and natural environment perceived as heritage including ‘monuments, sites, landscapes, skills, practices, knowledge and expressions of human creativity’ forming an important resource for economy, employment and social cohesion (EC 2021). Through the analysis of borderlands as sites of heritage and heritage-making, B-shapes strives to illuminate practices of dealing with multiple and often contested cultural heritage, national and transnational, intercultural understanding, and social cohesion. The mapping exercise in this policy brief is a part of that.



Evidence, Analysis, and Results

The research teams involved in the B-shapes project worked together to identify and analyse policies relevant to the eight border regions comprising ten national borders covered in the project (see map). Teams selected policies at municipal, regional and national levels, as well as policies crafted by cross-border governance institutions. The concept of policy was understood broadly, referring to different document types such as laws, strategies, guidelines etc., the terminology of which varied in the different languages depending on public administrative history and competence allocation between different levels and branches of government. Overall, sixty-four policies were provided by the project partners across their respective border regions, with strategies being the most common type of policy. Teams then analysed the policies in relation to their primary objectives, means for implementation and potential impacts, and a concise summary of the chosen policies outlining their primary objectives, actions, and potential impacts. The policies were analysed in relation to key European documents, including the Council of the Union Resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, the European Commission’s European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage and the Council of Europe’s European Cultural Heritage Strategy for the 21st century.



The analysis of the comprehensive collection resulted in a number of findings, which together show a significant diversity in the relevance and focus of policies across the different levels of governance:

National neglect: At the national level, cultural policies are often either not directly relevant to cross-border cooperation in this area (especially when the cultural policy is a state competence in federal states or has been devolved to regions in unitary states) or lack explicit references to the specific features of these territories as situated close to a border, a neighbouring country or being part of a borderland.

Uneven regional and local attention: Regional and local levels show greater variation, with some regions actively engaging in cross-border cultural initiatives while others do not. This inconsistency is also reflected in the role of cross-border cooperation itself—some regions prioritise cultural activities as part of their CBC efforts, while others neglect culture altogether. Overall though, the focus also of regional and local actors often remains on nationally confined spaces. Even in borderlands where cultural ties span national boundaries, many policies primarily focus on the internal development of a single region or country rather than fostering broader cross-border collaboration.

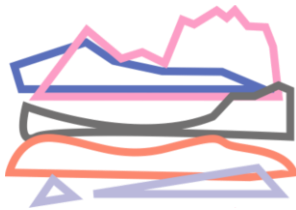
Minorities as drivers: recognised national minorities emerge as significant drivers of cultural initiatives, but this also varies across contexts. For instance, they are in South Tyrol and the Denmark-Germany border area, although this influence is less pronounced in the Hungarian-Slovak context.

Focus on economic value over cultural identity: A significant number of policies emphasised the economic benefits of cultural heritage, particularly through tourism development. However, fewer policies prioritised fostering a shared cultural identity or social cohesion in border regions, which are critical for long-term regional integration. Moreover, the focus on tourism does not always translate into actionable strategies or concrete measures.

Variation in stakeholder engagement: The extent to which local communities, cultural institutions, and private actors were involved in policy implementation varied widely across border regions. In some cases, policies promoted bottom-up participation, while others were more top-down, with little room for local influence or adaptability.

(Non)alignment with EU and international frameworks: The degree of alignment with EU policies and global conventions varies significantly. While some policies explicitly reference EU directives, UNESCO conventions, or cross-border cooperation initiatives like Interreg, others remain largely national or regional in focus, with minimal reference to broader frameworks. However, according to the reports,

Policy integration of cross-cutting themes: The policies bear witness to the importance of some cross-cutting mainstreamed themes, primarily sustainability and technology. A significant number of policies, particularly in environmentally sensitive border regions, are aiming at integrating cultural heritage with environmental sustainability goals with a potential cross-border dimension. Examples include policies related to UNESCO World Heritage sites and cross-border natural parks. A few policies explicitly emphasise the digitalisation of cultural heritage and the use of technology to promote cultural assets. This trend is most evident in national-level strategies in Austria and Italy. At the same time, gender equality/the role of women is less pronounced. The same goes for young people in border regions.



Policy Recommendations

- **Overall,** the analysis suggests there is greater potential for connectivity between processes and multistakeholder models for regional cross-border co-operation, and individual member state policy frameworks for heritage and cultural heritage. In some cases, this join-up will be achievable at the level of a specific borderland, but this will largely depend on levels of territorial subsidiarity, the degree to which heritage is valued locally and nationally, and the presence of proactive and connected policymakers and practitioners. Overall at an EU level, this issue may benefit from further exploration with senior policymakers at a central EU institutional level working respectively on regional policy and on heritage with member states to determine opportunities for read-across and more connected, joined-up working in ways which can release the potential of borderlands as collaborative fields for heritage and cultural heritage.
- **Work across scales:** Actors should work more closely across scales (national, regional and municipal) to release the potential for both heritage and cultural conservation for their intrinsic value and then secondarily within, for instance, the field of tourism. Heritage and culture as areas of policy and delivery are not only dependent on political and administrative policy-making but also on specialist knowledge of practitioners- for example, archaeologists, heritage conservation specialists, historians, ecologists, landscape and conservation architects and so on. There is value in investing in forums where the technical and professional stakeholders can drive cross-border approaches to heritage and cultural policy and strategy development. While modern jurisdictional borders may define an administrative territory, historical or ancient landscapes or shared heritage which runs across borders can only be articulated and brought to modern-day policymakers with the agency of the technical and professional community interacting with policy and decision-making systems. The value of working cross-border with the heritage assets themselves provides opportunities for other sectors, but such approaches should be focused on the intrinsic value of heritage rather than on commercialisation, as the latter can put the integrity of the former at risk. Conversely, well-conserved heritage in cross-border areas has considerable potential to grow SME sectors in tourism, culture and arts, landscape management, and technical and professional services associated with heritage assets. Examples of where Member State policy and implementation work cross-border include Ireland's National Monuments Service. The NMS has, at the central government level, committed to and operationalised an approach to developing and conserving cross-border

heritage ranging from prehistoric to modern historical periods. Its approach is characterised by partnership working across the heritage sector, local government sector, NGOs and with its neighbouring jurisdiction of Northern Ireland/UK. Ireland with the UK also has a cross-border UNESCO Geopark (Cuilcagh Lakelands), and there are more examples all over the EU under, for instance, the EGTC legal form — Geopark Karawanken (AT/SI), Geopark Muskau Arch (DE/PL), Strait of Bonifacio International Sea Park (FR/IT), the Iberian Pyrite Strip (ES/PT), the Cross-Border Arts and History Lands-Catalonian Tech & Ter Valleys (ES/FR), Plaines Scarpe Escaut European Nature Park (BE/FR), and Alpine Pearls (AT/IT/DE/SI). Equally, other initiatives such as *b-solutions* are working to assist cross-border natural resource areas in developing governance frameworks for integrated approaches to natural heritage resources (e.g. AEHR's work with EGTC Rio Minho on the Spain-Portugal border).

- **Utilise national minorities but also new minorities:** National minorities constitute important potential actors, and newly arrived residents and citizens constitute an underused resource in the cross-border regional space. Cultural landscapes in a border context can change and often be more diverse and innovative than in the interior of countries. This again provides for richness and opportunities of scalability, added value and sustainable economic opportunities for borderlands. It can also revive the historical concept of borderlands as places of diversity, of meeting places, where differences are celebrated as part of the richness of the region. The EU and Member States should pay attention to building such competencies not only in border regions but also at the centres of decision-making -and not only as a feature of national diplomacy but also as a driver for development cooperation. The EU cannot function effectively without the high levels of intercultural competency which are exercised within its processes and institutions. For the future of Europe, intercultural competency (which implies considering the other, considering how policies can reach across traditional boundaries and creating new choices for societies) should perhaps be valued as much as multilingualism for they are two sides of the same coin. An example of a border region where there is considerable historical precedent and potential for piloting such initiatives, while outside of the case study region is the cross-border region between Romania and Hungary- the historical province of Transylvania, where for example the city of Oradea in Romania operates an historically-informed power-sharing model of decision-making based on intercultural co-operation. There are many more cases across EU boundaries, plus those connected to traditional pilgrimage and cultural routes and trails as those listed by the Council of Europe, such as *Camino de Santiago*, *Via Regia*, *Via Habsburg*, *Via Charlemagne*, *Via Carpathia*, etc. Europe's borderlands are full of historical landscapes which predate contemporary borders and are, therefore, a hugely rich ground for developing intercultural competencies and awareness of how decision-making and policymaking can embrace rather than reject the complexity of borderlands.
- **Sustainability:** Cross-border policy design, codesign, and collaborative implementation in heritage are crucial for sustainability. Where cross-border shared natural heritage is concerned, and in responding to the climate crisis, there is a global and ethical imperative for transboundary work in the conservation and stewardship of natural heritage resources. The extent to which these are publicly valued often lies in cultural memories either obscured or activated as narratives which can build capacity for public values relating to heritage in borderlands, whether natural, built, archaeological, artistic, scientific or cultural. Transboundary collaborative governance needs to be explored and capacity built at all levels of public governance for such processes and models. It also requires the development of a shared understanding of natural heritage in border territories where it is even more important that policies do have a cross-border dimension or potential for delivery in partnership with neighbouring states- either at local, regional, central or all three levels. A specific issue which can also benefit from cross-border approaches and economies of scale in investments is the

conservation of built and archaeological heritage in the context of damage from climate change, and energy efficiency in the context of historic buildings.

- **Include young people:** Intergenerational approaches to rediscovering and reimagining heritage and cultural landscapes in borderlands can prove a rich area for cultural innovation, social and civic cohesion, and the generation of heritage, arts, cultural and tourism-related SMEs in borderlands which conserve heritage and cultural resources as core assets. The involvement of young people in interpretation and in building a public understanding of heritage and cultural assets in border regions is crucial for the future. Interventions should be supported across the EU where young people are given the opportunity to engage with each other in dialogue and interpreting heritage and culture of their borderlands. National cultural and heritage agencies should be involved in such initiatives and also consult with young people on how best to ensure that heritage and culture are seen as valuable assets for cohesion and sustainability in the future
- **More Europe:** The idea of borderlands as cross-border heritage and cultural heritage landscapes may benefit from further work to connect regional policy with EU-wide heritage and cultural heritage policymaking at the central EU institutional level across functional administrative areas e.g. within the European Commission. The organisation of fora where these policy alignment discussions can happen may assist with greater co-ordination and transmission of ideas across administrative boundaries within Member States engaging with the European Commission
- **Progressing the issue.**

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Website: <https://www.sdu.dk/en/forskning/forskningsenheder/samf/b-shapes>

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