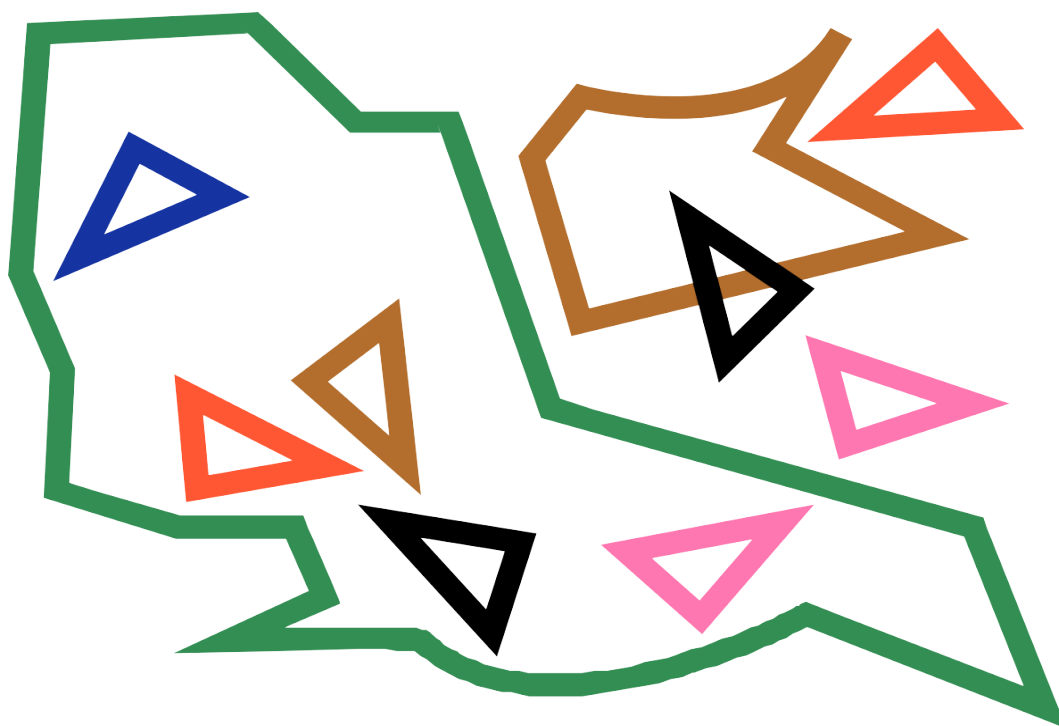


Policy Brief # 7

Eastern Borderlands in Transformative Times: Policy Explorations



B-Shapes - Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies

Author: Joanna Kurowska-Pysz (KREATUS, WSB University)

Co-authors: Sara Svensson (Halmstad University), Caitriona Mullan (AEBR), Piotr Kurowski (KREATUS)

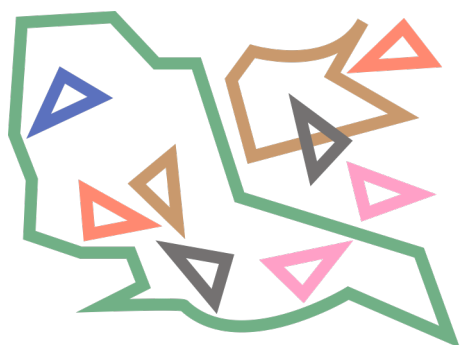


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Executive Summary

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 years. 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 seventh in a series that B-SHAPES produces to offer support for evidence-based policymaking and inclusive considerations for policymakers and those interested in the role of borders within the wider context of EU Cohesion policy and practice.

The Policy Brief presents the outcome of a policy seminar held in order to test and validate the relevance of policy scenarios outside the case study areas included in the B-Shapes region, especially with relation to the volatile geopolitical situation at the European Union's eastern Border. The policy seminar focused on a policy scenario developed by B-Shapes partner KREATUS and was held at the Lithuanian-Polish border on April 25, 2025. The venue was Lazdijai, a town located in the so-called Suwałki Gap.

Discussion revealed that to sustain cross-border cultural cooperation with reduced INTERREG funds, actors must rely on strong institutional and personal relationships. Currently, this cooperation is neglected in national and local policies and suffers from poor coordination. It makes practical, long-term cross-border cooperation very challenging. Staff involved in cross-border cultural projects should acquire new skills to secure funding from diverse sources beyond the INTERREG programme, thereby preventing the weakening of valuable cross-border cultural partnerships, if funds are limited. This is vital because culture builds a shared community identity, not just for tourism. The current short-term approach to cross-border project exploitation is an unsustainable framework for long-term cooperation, often resulting in the termination of cooperation when funding is discontinued.

To overcome these challenges, key policy recommendations revolve around the importance of fostering institutional and personal relationships and reducing dependence on the INTERREG funding scheme; we also recommend the need for a focus on funding body criteria

that prioritize sustainable collaborations and social cohesion activities and revised cultural development policies that at different levels integrate the goals of cross-border cooperation.



Context

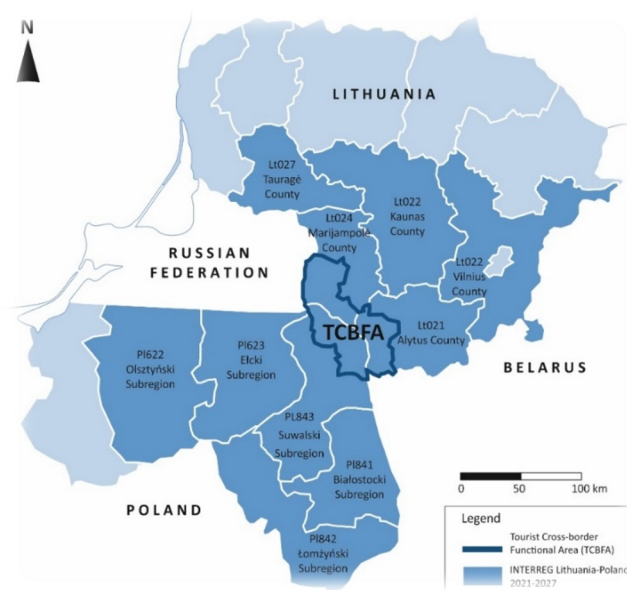
This Policy Brief summarizes policy-relevant observations and suggestions coming out from a dialogue with policymakers at the Lithuanian-Polish borders, held on April 25, 2025, in Lazdijai (Lithuania). Nine representatives of the Lithuanian and Polish entities cooperating under the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation “Polish-Lithuanian Cross-Border Functional Area” participated, including representatives of local governments, cultural centres and NGOs. The seminar was conducted in the national languages and translated simultaneously.

The seminar involved, first, presentation of the emerging findings of B-Shapes research (Policy Briefs #1-#5), followed by the tabling of two policy scenarios for discussion. These scenarios had been prepared by B-Shapes partner KREATUS in collaboration with the entire B-Shapes consortium.

The Lithuanian-Polish borderland, known as the Suwałki Gap, is an area that neighbours the Kaliningrad Zone (Russia) on one side and Belarus on the other. It is also relatively close to the territory where the Russian military operates against Ukraine. The Lithuanian-Polish border is approximately 100 km long, and it can be viewed as a narrow land belt connecting the Baltic countries with the rest of the EU countries and NATO allies. Since the illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia, cross-border cooperation with Russia and Belarus has stopped, and normal relations among neighbouring societies have ceased. The area also suffered significant losses from the suspension of commercial cross-border trade with those countries. Considering its strategic location, the area is currently facing various hybrid attacks from the Russian side, including cyberattacks, and experiencing losses related to depopulation, a decline in investments, and a decrease in tourist interest. Former perceptions and experiences of this particular borderland as a quiet area with a slower pace of life have been challenged by the more recent changes in migration flows across the border. The area therefore needs to find an alternative way to boost socio-economic development to compensate for its loss of ability

to cooperate with a wider hinterland, and mitigate the negative consequences of its complex geopolitical situation. One of the solutions is establishing a Touristic Cross-Border Functional Area, which is run by the EGTC “Polish-Lithuanian Cross-Border Functional Area Ltd” in Punszk (Poland), covering Polish communes and Lithuanian regions neighbouring the border.

Map 1. Polish-Lithuanian touristic cross-border functional area and the INTERREG Lithuania-Poland



Source: Studzieniecki, T., Jakubowski, A., & Kurowska-Pysz, J. (2024). Cross-Border Functional Area as an Organisational and Legal Instrument of Polish-Lithuanian Cross-Border Cooperation. *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia*, 33(1), 279-299.

Scenario 1

Individual cross-border partnerships are the central administrators of cross-border projects, focusing on tourism and culture and resulting in long-term development strategies for border areas.

Scenario 2

Euroregions and EGTCs are the leading actors responsible for using the results of cross-border projects, focusing on tourism and culture, in the long-term development strategies of border areas.



Conclusions

Conclusion 1

Maintaining the involvement of Euroregions and EGTCs in the further development of cross-border cooperation in the field of culture in the event of a reduction in INTERREG programme funds after 2027 can be based on two types of cross-border relations:

- good and lasting inter-organisational, institutional relations between entities that co-create Euroregions and EGTCs on both sides of the border and can also co-finance them in the long term, by capitalising on outcomes of already developed cross-border projects in terms of culture,
- personal relations based on trust and mutual sympathy, between persons cooperating within Euroregions and EGTCs on both sides of the border, and at the same time being local hubs for project partners on both sides of the border who want to continue developing cooperation in the field of culture, despite the reduction in the contribution of the INTERREG programme, e.g. cultural centres, non-governmental organisations, craftsmen, local folk artists, etc.

Conclusion 2:

The cross-border historical and cultural heritage, the importance of cross-border cooperation for the development of culture, and the topics of cross-border cultural projects are not sufficiently considered when planning the development of culture in neighbouring countries. Cross-border policy publications or operational documents (strategies, plans) are not adequately taken into account in the development of national, regional and local policies and strategies for the development of culture. Such national policy publications only partially take into account the issue of cross-border cooperation in culture, or do not take it into account at all, neither at the level of objectives nor at the level of measures to achieve the goals. This represents a lost opportunity which could, if optimized, contribute to a more sustainable approach to the long-term development of cross-border cooperation in culture and accordingly as an innate asset for regional development.

Conclusion 3

Cultural entities on both sides of the border conduct very dispersed activities that are not properly coordinated at the local or regional level, and even less so at the cross-border level. Very often, it is unknown who does what, what projects they are implementing, what cultural services they are developing and what infrastructure they are investing in. It is impossible to ensure practical, long-term cross-border cooperation in the field of culture if this information is not passed on to partners on the other side of the border, as an element of, for example, cross-border planning, both in the social and spatial dimension.

Conclusion 4

Taking into account possible limitations in the availability of funds from the INTERREG programme, staff of entities that have so far developed cross-border cooperation in culture using mainly this programme should acquire competences to gain funds from other sources, including commercial ones, because otherwise the lack of access to INTERREG funding will end many valuable cross-border partnerships in the field of culture.

Conclusion 5

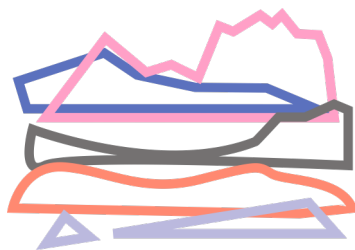
Considering that many cross-border projects and partnerships in culture are fund-driven, in the event of a reduction in funds available in the INTERREG programme, some of these partnerships will end their cooperation. This will harm the possibility of capitalising on the results of the INTERREG Programme concerning already implemented projects. Key cross-border cultural partnerships and projects should have secured alternative financing to continue their activities, even in the commercial scope, e.g., tourism.

Conclusion 6

Culture is an essential dimension of building a sense of identity and togetherness of borderland community, therefore cross-border cultural projects should not be perceived only in the aspect of creating an attractive offer, e.g. for tourists, but also in the dimension of protecting the historical and cultural heritage of the borderland and creating its common identity, which is very important for strengthening cross-border integration and tightening cross-border ties between neighboring communities. While acknowledging that different meanings – sometimes conflictual – can be assigned to borderland cultures, the borderland's intangible heritage (stories, traditions, dialects, cuisine, crafts) is a massive asset that does not require significant investments and may be considered a solid social capital of the region.

Conclusion 7

Most entities cooperating on the borderlands in the field of culture are focused on cooperating in the project mode, or more precisely, in the cross-border project life cycle, while in the periods between the implementation of individual projects, cooperation disappears or is reduced to a minimum. This focus on collaboration only in the project mode, including mainly those financed by the INTERREG program, stiffens the framework of action across borders.



Policy recommendations

Recommendation 1

Establish and develop long-term cross-border relations at all levels of staffing across institutions, as well as additional funding for the continued existence of entities involved in cross-border cooperation (e.g. Euroregions, EGTCs, LAGs etc.), which can be based on capitalising on the outcomes of cross-border cultural projects and which can be resistant to changes in cooperating entities e.g. related to the election scores.

Recommendation owners: Euroregions and EGTCs, as well as Local Action Groups, and other entities cooperating across the border under the CLLD model.

Recommendation 2

When designing or updating national, regional and local policies and strategies for developing culture, the issue of cross-border cooperation in culture should be sufficiently emphasized, including outcomes of existing cross-border documents (strategies, plans) on culture development.

Recommendation owners: Entities responsible for designing or updating national, regional and local policies and strategies for developing culture, including Euroregions and EGTCs.

Recommendation 3

Cross-border cultural planning should be part of the long-term planning for Euroregions, EGTCs, and other entities involved in cross-border cooperation in culture.

Recommendation owners: Euroregions, EGTCs, and other entities responsible for planning cultural activities and investments, particularly those located closer to the border.

Recommendation 4

Bodies developing cross-border cooperation in culture should reduce over-dependence on INTERREG funding sources and ensure that staff dealing with funding opportunities have adequate knowledge of a wider range of funding opportunities from across a range of sources on both sides of the border- including philanthropic, commercial and public resources. Such sources could include:

- microgrants from local budgets e.g. small, dedicated funds for cross-border cooperation, available to NGOs and informal groups;
- crowdfunding, e.g. collections for specific, attractive goals to residents, e.g. publishing a bilingual book with border legends, renovating a historic chapel or organising a festival.
- partnerships with local businesses e.g. engaging SMEs from both sides of the border, which, as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) actions, supporting specific cultural activities, perceiving them as an investment in the local community.

Recommendation owners: Euroregions, EGTCs, Local Action Groups, and other entities cooperating cross-border in the field of culture.

Recommendation 5

Bodies responsible for delivering funds of the INTERREG Programme and other programmes dedicated to boosting cross-border cooperation should consider project selection criteria which support only long-term collaboration, which tends to develop valuable and prospective cross-border cultural offers that can be umbrella for other further projects and initiatives to be clustered together as cross-border set of cultural offers, existing independently of the INTERREG Programme support.

Recommendation owners: Managing Authorities of the INTERREG Programmes, Joint Technical Secretariats, Euroregions, EGTCs, LAGs and other entities delivering funds of the INTERREG Programme and other programmes dedicated to boosting cross-border cooperation.

Recommendation 6

Bodies developing cross-border cooperation in culture should pay more attention to the social aspects of their projects and include activities related to building a sense of identity and togetherness of the borderland community. They may develop, among others, following cross-border activities:

- cross-border workshops e.g. organizing joint culinary, craft (e.g. lace-making, pottery), music or dance workshops, led by local masters and custodians of tradition, addressed residents and tourists,
- documentation projects and social archives e.g. engaging residents, especially young people and seniors, in collecting and digitizing old photographs, recording stories and oral history from both sides of the border,
- joint celebration e.g. organizing “Neighbor Days” or micro-festivals focused on common or similar traditions and customs, taking place alternately on both sides of the border.

Recommendation owners: Euroregions, EGTCs, Local Action Groups, and other entities cooperating cross-border in the field of culture.

Recommendation 7

A change of philosophy of cross-border cooperation in the culture sphere is necessary: from projects to processes and relationships. Instead of one-off, significant events, one should focus on continuity and regularity of cooperation, even if it is more modest. These can be activities such as:

- regular networking meetings, i.e. cyclical, low-cost working meetings for cultural animators, artists, directors of local institutions and representatives of NGOs from both sides of the border to exchange ideas and build trust;
- residency programs based on exchange, within which institutions or artists host each other based on reciprocity (e.g. providing a studio, apartment), which minimizes financial costs;
- creating an open, bilingual database with profiles of artists, craftsmen, folk groups, and organizations from the border regions, facilitating the direct establishment of contacts.

Recommendation owners: Euroregions, EGTCs, Local Action Groups, INTERREG project partners, and other entities cooperating cross-border in the field of culture.

Project Information:

- Project Beneficiaries: University of Southern Denmark (SDU), Denmark; Brunel University of London, United Kingdom; European Academy Bozen (Eurac Research), Italy; Oulu University, Finland; Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest, Hungary; Technical University of Liberec, Czechia; University of Wrocław, Poland; Université de Strasbourg, France; the National Museum of History, Bulgaria; the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), Germany; the Foundation Network of European Remembrance and Solidarity, Poland; Kreatus, Poland; Lungomare Art Collective, Italy; and Hogskolan Halmstad, Sweden
- Duration: April 2023 – March 2026 (36 months)

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LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13019005/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/people/B-Shapes/100092507586694/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/bshapes2023/>

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