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Borders Shaping
Perceptions of European Societies

Deliverable 4.2:

Report "Minority Youth and Their Perceptions of Borders and the EU"

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Executive Summary

Please see Annex 1 for translations in the following languages: Czech, Danish, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish.[1]

The B-SHAPES project focuses on how people perceive Europe, paying close attention to how border narratives and processes of re-bordering can influence these perceptions. This report specifically explores how young people from national minority communities in European border regions perceive borders, Europe, and the European Union (EU). It draws on five case studies—South Tyrol (Italy–Austria), Zaolzie/Těšín Silesia (Poland–Czechia), North and South Schleswig (Denmark–Germany), Southern Slovakia (Hungary–Slovakia), and Western Thrace (Greece–Bulgaria–Türkiye)—to provide bottom-up insights into everyday experiences of borders and European integration.

The study, conducted in 2024-2025, focused on young adults aged 18–31, using a combination of semi-structured interviews and zine-making workshops. These approaches enabled participants to express their narratives both visually and verbally, generating perspectives that move beyond the elite-level and media discourses. By comparing youth accounts with minority media narratives (Engl et al., 2024) the study highlights both convergences and disconnections between public and personal understandings of Europe. The analysis reveals a notable gap between minority media narratives and young people's perceptions. While media outlets often frame borders and Europe in politicized or securitized terms, young people tend to adopt pragmatic, functional perspectives. This divergence underscores that youth voices are often underrepresented in public narratives, despite their importance for the future of European integration.

Findings show that for most study participants, borders are experienced as open and largely invisible, a result of Schengen mobility and normalization of cross-border practices. Borders are frequently understood as opportunities rather than barriers, associated with education, work, shopping, leisure, and family ties. However, they remain symbolically significant: many young people frame cultural and linguistic divides, rather than state borders, as the "real" frontiers in their lives. Historical legacies and family memories also continue to shape how borders are imagined, even where physical border controls have disappeared.

Moments of disruption, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, exposed the fragility of this sense of openness. Recent re-bordering events have highlighted how strongly minority youth rely on mobility, reinforcing the value they place on Schengen but also reminding them of the potential precarity of European integration. Comparisons with securitized external borders, such as Greek-Turkish border, further underscored the contrast between everyday openness and the reality of exclusion elsewhere.

Perceptions of Europe and the EU were generally pragmatic. Participants emphasized the tangible benefits of EU membership, especially free movement, Erasmus, Interrail, and EU regional funding, rather than symbolic identification with Europe. The EU was often taken for granted as a background condition of daily life, producing a form of "banal Europeanism". While some young people valued the EU as a guarantor of minority rights and a source of funding, others regarded it as distant, inefficient, or inconsistent in its protection of minorities. The positive perceptions of the EU's role in two of the cases (South Tyrol

[1] Translations were machine-translated and checked by the respective project partners.

and North and South Schleswig) were strongly shaped by earlier minority rights settlements that were established independently of the EU. While these arrangements originated from national or bilateral agreements and broader Council of Europe frameworks, the research participants in these border areas associated them with the EU, seeing it as a guarantor of diversity and minority protection.

Regional and minority identities emerged as particularly strong. Many participants identified foremost with their borderland or national minority community (eg. South Tyrolean, Zaolziak, Schleswigian, Hungarian in Slovakia (*felvidéki*)), rather than with broader national or European categories. These localized identities often offered a way to transcend national divisions while affirming cultural distinctiveness.

Overall, the report shows that minority youth in border regions normalize European integration through their everyday practices but do not necessarily articulate strong emotional attachment to the EU. Their views reflect a pragmatic embrace of mobility and opportunity, tempered by skepticism about institutional commitment to minority rights. These findings highlight both the achievements and vulnerabilities of European integration in times of crisis, while underlining the importance of listening to young people's voices in shaping inclusive visions of Europe's future.

1. Introduction

Authors: Alice Engl, Marcus Nicolson, Johanna Mitterhofer

The objective of this report is to investigate the perceptions of young national minority borderlanders (aged 18-31) in relation to borders and Europe, as well as the narratives associated with these concepts. Specifically, we focus on national minority and borderland case study sites in Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Germany, Italy, and Slovakia. In each of these sites, we have used semi-structured interviews and participatory arts-based methods to explore the key research questions of the study: How do young national minorities perceive borders? How do young people perceive Europe and the European Union? These questions reflect the B-SHAPES project's overarching aim to understand better how perceptions of borders and European integration are shaped from below, in borderland regions, especially considering ongoing re-bordering trends and sociopolitical crises.

The report is structured as follows: we first set out our justification for the study and present a summary of the existing research on the attitudes of young members of national minorities towards borders and Europe. We then explain our methodology, outlining our use of semi-structured interviews as well as the participatory creative arts research method, zine-making. In this section, we also outline the framework used for data analysis. Next, we provide the contextual background for each case study, drawing on historical and socio-economic data, and present the results and empirical data from the five case study sites. Each case study provides valuable insights into how young people in minority borderland communities perceive borders, experience bordering practices in daily life, and engage with the ideas of Europe and the EU. We then contrast the findings with the results from our earlier media analysis of minority media to explore convergences and tensions between public and individual narratives (Engl et al. 2024). The subsequent discussion identifies and compares key thematic patterns that emerge from the data gathered across the case studies. In the conclusion section, we summarise the main findings, present our concluding remarks of the report and outline the key contributions that the study makes to knowledge, suggesting possible lines for future inquiry in this area.

2. Conceptual Background and Study Rationale

Authors: Alice Engl, Marcus Nicolson, Johanna Mitterhofer

This report explores how young adults from national minority communities in European border regions perceive borders, how they relate to the idea of Europe, and how their views are shaped by both everyday experiences and narratives operating at different levels of inference. It forms part of a broader investigation into how borders continue to shape European societies.

The B-SHAPES project focuses on how people perceive Europe, paying close attention to how border narratives and processes of re-bordering can influence these perceptions (Opiłowska et al., 2023; Sarmiento-Mirwaldt et al., 2025). While the EU envisions itself as a space without internal borders, recent events such as the 2015 so-called 'migration crisis' and the COVID-19 pandemic have triggered the reintroduction of border controls. These developments have revealed the fragility of the European idea of open borders and confirmed the ongoing power of borders to divide, shape identities, and impact people's everyday lives (Medeiros et al., 2020; Wassenberg, 2020). In this context, border regions become key spaces

both where European integration is experienced most directly and where tensions between unity and division are most visible.

This report focuses on national minority communities living in five selected border regions: the German-speaking community in South Tyrol, the German and Danish minorities in the German-Danish border region, the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, the Polish minority in Czechia, and the Turkish minority in northeastern Greece (Thrace). These regions are historically marked by shifting borders and overlapping cultural influences. For national minorities, borders are not just geopolitical lines but are entangled, experienced, and continuously negotiated in everyday crossings and social interactions.

In focus of this report are the perspectives of young adults from these minority groups. Through a series of interviews and workshops, we engaged with young people to explore how they think and feel about borders, how they perceive the European Union, and how their views reflect or differ from the narratives they encounter in the local media that serve their (minority) communities. These methods allowed us to examine how personal experiences, family histories, and the local context each contribute to shaping young people's understanding of borders, European integration, identity, and belonging. We also investigate the possible role of key de- and re-bordering events, including the so-called ‘migration crisis’ of 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic, in shaping perceptions of borders and the European project in minority regions.

This work contributes to the broader goals of the B-SHAPES project by offering a bottom-up understanding of borders in contemporary Europe. Young people’s political perceptions in border regions may be influenced by historical border legacies, and, at the same time, these individuals have the potential to act as agents shaping how Europe is imagined and built. Throughout this report, we argue that young borderlander voices are essential to understanding the challenges and possibilities facing European cohesion today.

In placing national minority voices at the forefront of discussions around borders, this report aims to investigate how borders shape perceptions of Europe in everyday life. It highlights the diversity of experiences and understandings that exist within minority communities and calls attention to the importance of studying the perceptions of under-researched actors and communities, such as minorities living in borderlands.

The report also considers the context and culture in which the research participants are embedded. Each border region included in this study has a distinct history of shifting borders, minority experiences, and cross-border relations, which shape the everyday realities and identities of its inhabitants. These local contexts influence how young people understand borders. The central aim of this report is to identify common themes that run across these borderland minority communities and the young people who live in them. At the same time, we seek to highlight how these themes might be articulated differently depending on local histories and border dynamics. Finally, we compare the public narratives identified in daily minority newspapers with the personal narratives gathered through interviews and workshops with young adults. This comparison reveals how public discourses in minority media are interpreted, challenged, and sometimes reimagined by the young people living in these regions.

Historical experience, political expectations, and institutional dynamics shape national minorities’ perceptions of Europe and the EU. A dominant view in the literature frames the EU as a conditional supporter of minority rights. This perception stems from the Copenhagen Criteria, which imposed minority protection standards on candidate countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s and 2000s (Malloy, 2022). However, this conditionality applied only to applicants, not to existing member states, creating a double standard between older members like France or Greece and new member states. The EU is thus seen as inconsistent, promoting minority rights when politically useful but neglecting them

once accession is complete (Constantin, 2017; Nagy & Vizi, 2022). The lack of enforcement tools and declining prioritization of autochthonous minorities has led to growing disillusionment (Massetti & Schakel, 2021, 427).

Alongside this, the EU is also perceived as an enabler of connectivity, particularly through de-bordering policies such as Schengen, the Single Market, and cohesion funding. These instruments have helped minorities, especially in border regions, to maintain cross-border cultural and economic ties and pursue transnational cooperation (Engl, 2020; 2022; Hoch, 2022). However, integration does not always foster mutual trust. Some communities feel left out of Europeanisation processes, and increased mobility can even trigger resentment (Decoville & Durand, 2019). Moreover, EU efforts to build a common European identity may undermine regional distinctiveness, leading minorities to view the EU as a cultural homogenizer (Kiraly, 2022). During so-termed crisis moments like the increased migration in 2015-2016 or the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been pressure to align with national or European identities at the expense of local ones (Tarvet & Klatt, 2023).

The EU is also seen as an institutional resource and as a platform offering legal tools, funding, and political visibility for minority advocacy. Initiatives such as the European Parliament's InterGroup on minority rights and the Minority SafePack have been used by minority actors to advance their claims (Nagy & Vizi, 2022; Waterbury, 2021). However, symbolic setbacks, such as the EU's rejection of the SafePack despite strong public support, reinforce the perception of the EU as distant and unresponsive (Crepaz, 2014) and have led to dissatisfaction with the EU's perceived lack of active support (Scott 2020, 665; see also Tárnok, 2022). The gap between institutional access and practical influence has been said to have eroded trust in the EU as a reliable actor for minority concerns (Smith et al., 2019).

Finally, minority and regionalist enthusiasm for European integration that has been identified by scholars is partially waning. The EU's reluctance to engage in internal territorial disputes or clarify kin-state relations has led to frustration and a rise in Euroscepticism among groups previously seen as pro-European (Massetti & Schakel, 2021; Waterbury, 2008). The securitization of minorities, where they are framed as security threats, further strains interethnic relations and can deepen distrust between minorities and their home states (Bourne, 2003; Liebich, 2019). While some minority institutions continue to pursue sub-state diplomacy and peacebuilding through EU channels (Klatt, 2018; McCall & Itçaina, 2017), the broader trend suggests that the EU's capacity to act as a stable guarantor of minority protection is perceived as increasingly uncertain.

A review of the existing literature on national minorities and their relationship with the EU reveals a clear predominance of top-down analytical frameworks. Much of the research tends to focus on the role of European institutions, legal instruments, political elites, and policies in shaping the experiences and rights of minority groups. Studies often examine how EU enlargement criteria, cohesion funds, and various political platforms support or neglect minority issues.

In parallel, another dominant approach concentrates on minority representation. It examines how minority interests are articulated and mobilized through formal political actors such as ethnic parties, NGOs, advocacy networks, and transnational alliances. Scholars have investigated how these representative structures engage with the European political system, make use of EU channels, or participate in campaigns like the Minority SafePack initiative. These perspectives, while crucial, still operate within elite or organizational domains, largely viewing minorities from their intermediaries rather than the communities themselves.

What remains underexplored in the literature is the bottom-up dimension of how minority individuals, especially those outside institutional or political leadership roles, understand, experience, and narrate Europe in their everyday lives. In particular, minority voices themselves are often absent from the analytical frameworks that dominate the field. This results in a paradox; while national minorities are frequently discussed, their voices are rarely heard in scholarship.

The B-SHAPES project adds this bottom-up perspective by investigating the micro-level perspectives of young adults from minority communities living in border regions. Indeed, border research traditionally centers on adult perspectives, thereby neglecting how borders shape—and are shaped by—younger populations. Yet, children and young people are not passive participants in bordering processes; they impact borders and borderlands through their own activity and agency (Venken et al., 2021).

With regards to the study of perceptions of Europe, compared to older generations, young people across the EU tend to hold more favourable attitudes towards the European Union (e.g. Lauterbach and De Vries, 2020; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2010). Around three in five respondents are generally in favour of the EU (Eurobarometer, 2024). Youth perceptions of the EU vary notably across Europe, shaped by national contexts and regional priorities. While young people from Denmark, Czechia and Italy had slightly more positive views on Europe than the EU average, young Slovaks, Germans, Poles and Hungarians were below average.

By foregrounding their personal narratives, the B-SHAPES project seeks to enrich our understanding of how the EU, and the European integration process are perceived not by elites or intermediaries, but by those living at the margins of the state. By incorporating voices that have often been overlooked, the B-Shapes project aims to move beyond conventional top-down narratives and contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced account of how Europe is lived and imagined by its diverse populations.

3. Methodology

Authors: Marcus Nicolson, Alice Engl, Anna Tüdős

The methodology employed in this study combines qualitative approaches that include creative arts research, specifically zine-making, alongside semi-structured interviews with young adults aged 18-31 from national minority communities.

Zine-making is a creative and participatory method where participants create their own paper booklets (zines) in which they explore a specific theme or topic. The central purpose of arts-informed research is to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible (Knowles & Cole 2008, 59). In our zine-making workshops, the participants were asked to respond to specific border newspaper headlines and images which had been gathered during our earlier media analysis (Engl et al. 2024), and to share their own experiences and relationships with the local border. The methodological approach was adopted in line with the Citizen Science principles of the B-Shapes project to actively involve citizens in problem definition, data collection, and evaluation (Golumbic et al., 2017). To facilitate the development of zine workshops across the international case study sites, we first developed a detailed workshop plan to ensure that the same activity could be replicated across all case study sites. To do this, photographs and headlines were taken, printed, and copied from newspaper articles analysed in the local context.

It has been argued that through the slow process of creating and sharing their zine creations, as well as interrogating the motivations behind their creative choices, participants can experience revelatory moments (Weida, 2020). Also, through asking a series of carefully formulated prompting questions, it is possible for workshop facilitators to engage in dialogue about the meanings behind the words and images presented in the resulting zines (Brown, 2024).

Second, we used semi-structured interviews to add further detail and personal insights to the data gathered through the creative arts workshops. The semi-structured interviews followed a guide of questions and prompts to gain insights into the participants' perceptions of borders and political issues related to their lived experiences as national minority borderlanders.

We then employed thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes and to identify and interpret patterns in both visual and textual materials. The analysis also compared these youth-generated themes with narratives found in minority newspapers, highlighting both alignments and tensions. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how borders are lived, imagined, and contested by young people in contrast to broader public narratives.

Recruitment:

The primary recruitment strategy for the workshops focused on minority educational institutions, such as secondary schools and universities, as the main channels for identifying and involving young minority adults as workshop participants[2] At the university level, students were recruited from the Faculty of Education at J. Selye University (JSU) in Komárno, a Hungarian-language institution in southwestern Slovakia. Secondary schools were key recruitment partners in North Schleswig, South Tyrol and the Zaolzie region. Participants included students from the Juliusz Słowacki Gymnasium in Český Těšín, Czech Republic, which serves the Polish minority, as well as from the Deutsches Gymnasium Nordschleswig, the German-language high school of the German minority in Denmark. A zine-making workshop with students from the Danish minority in Germany was not possible, as the school association of the Danish minority in Germany does not allow identity-related research with their students for ethical reasons. Another group of students participated from a German-language high school in Innichen/San Candido, South Tyrol, Italy. In addition, complementary recruitment took place in South Tyrol through local networks and associations as well as personal contacts, through a process of snowballing.

Table 1: Workshops in case study regions

Case study region	**Number of workshop participants**	**Gender Distribution**	
		f	**m**
South Tyrol	11	8	3

[2] We also organized a pilot zine-making workshop in Flensburg, Germany, during the Europeada national minority youth football tournament in July 2024 to test and refine the method.

Southern Slovakia	13	5	8
North Schleswig	19	13	6
Zaolzie region	13	7	6
Western Thrace	24	14	10

Participants for the interviews were recruited through established institutional channels and personal networks. These institutions included the minority educational sector as well as other associations and organizations of the national minorities, such as local farmers' associations, political parties, trade organizations, and a variety of civil society groups. Further support came from youth organizations, youth branches of political parties, municipal councils, and local cultural institutions. Personal contacts also played a supplementary role in facilitating access to possible interview partners. It was often fruitful to use these "gatekeepers", such as community organisers and teachers, to gain access to our target group. We carried out the interviews both in person and online and used a common interview guide that covered three broad areas: 1) minority identity, 2) experiencing the border, 3) experiencing Europe.

Table 2: Interviews in case study regions

Case study region	**Number of interviews**	**Gender**	
		f	**m**
South Tyrol	6	4	2
South Slovakia	7	4	3
North Schleswig	2	2	
South Schleswig	4	2	2
Zaolzie region	9	5	4
Western Thrace	9	Not available[3]	

4. Case study contexts

4.1 South Tyrol in the Italian-Austrian borderland

Authors: Alice Engl, Johanna Mitterhofer

The Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen, commonly also known as South Tyrol, is located in northern Italy, bordering Austria and Switzerland. With a population of approximately 516,000 (as of the 2024 linguistic census), it is linguistically and culturally diverse: around 68.6% of the inhabitants are German speakers, 26.98% Italian speakers, and 4.41% Ladin speakers (Carlà et al., 2025).

[3] Due to staff change at HISTORYMUS, it has not been possible to retrieve the gender division. Interviews were conducted with female and male minority members.

This linguistic composition is a legacy of the post-World War I geopolitical realignment, particularly the 1919 Treaty of Saint-Germain, which transferred South Tyrol from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Italy. The ensuing decades saw aggressive Italianization under Fascism, followed by international tensions that led to the 1946 Gruber-De Gasperi Agreement between Austria and Italy. This treaty enshrined protections for the German- and Ladin-speaking populations and became the basis for South Tyrol's autonomous status. The 1972 Second Autonomy Statute established one of the most advanced systems of minority rights and self-governance in Europe. Austria, as South Tyrol's "kinstate", retains a recognized protective role based on international law. Though no longer an active dispute party, Austria continues to monitor developments and supports South Tyrol's autonomy model bilaterally and in international forums (Carlà et al., 2025).

Economically, South Tyrol is one of Italy's most prosperous regions. In 2023, it reported a GDP per capita of €52,000, which is well above the EU average. Key sectors include tourism, which accounts for approximately 15% of the GDP, advanced agriculture, high-quality manufacturing, and renewable energy. The province has considerable fiscal autonomy, retaining the majority of locally collected taxes, which enables substantial reinvestment in infrastructure, social services, and environmental initiatives (Carlà et al., 2025). The unemployment rate is consistently below 4%, which is less than half the average in Italy, including a comparatively high employment rate among women and youth.

European integration has played a significant role in shaping South Tyrol's contemporary political geography and public imagination. While the European Union has not been directly involved in South Tyrol's minority protection framework, as these guarantees were bilaterally negotiated between Italy and Austria, key integration milestones have nonetheless had symbolic and practical significance. Austria's accession to the EU in 1995, followed by its entry into the Schengen Area in 1998, enabled the dismantling of border controls along the border between Austria and Italy. The symbolic opening of this historically contested border shortly after the 1992 formal conflict settlement between Italy and Austria was widely perceived as a turning point, reinforcing narratives of normalization and cross-border reconciliation. In South Tyrolean public discourse, the EU has since been associated less with minority rights than with the concrete benefits of free movement, economic exchange, and renewed regional ties to the kin-state Tyrol. This integration has also facilitated institutional collaboration within the EGTC 'Euregio Tyrol–South Tyrol–Trentino'.

Despite these achievements, the institutional structure of South Tyrol's consociation system as well as demographic patterns of the Italian-speaking community living mainly in urban areas, leads to a certain distance between the language groups. While designed to protect minority identities, the consociational system has contributed to limited intergroup interaction, particularly in everyday life and civil society. Tensions related to identity and nationalism remain a persistent feature of South Tyrol's political and social landscape. The region's autonomy model, while successful in managing linguistic diversity institutionally, has not fully resolved underlying divergences in collective memory, political identification, and symbolic representation. These differences are periodically brought to the surface through controversies involving national symbols, such as flags or public rituals, and are particularly visible in disputes over Fascist-era monuments like the Victory Monument in Bozen/Bolzano.

4.2 Zaolzie /Těšínské Slezsko in the Polish-Czech borderland

Authors: Hynek Böhm, Elżbieta Opiłowska

Zaolzie is a region in the eastern part of the Czech Republic, adjoining the Polish border and home to a historically rooted Polish minority. With approximately 35,000–40,000 Poles living in the Moravian-Silesian Region (as per the 2021 Czech census), the community represents one of the most visible and active national minorities in the country. This demographic pattern is a consequence of the 1920 division of Cieszyn Silesia between Poland and Czechoslovakia. This post-World War I settlement left a significant Polish-speaking population on the Czechoslovak side of the border. The decision remains symbolically charged, forming a backdrop to the region's identity politics.

Unlike South Tyrol's formal autonomy, Zaolzie does not enjoy a dedicated territorial or political status. Nonetheless, Polish life in the region is institutionally well developed. There exists a network of Polish schools, cultural associations, and media outlets, including *Głos*, a minority newspaper published twice a week. The Czech Republic recognizes Poles as a national minority with associated rights under domestic law and international treaties.

The NGO Congress of Poles in the Czech Republic (*Kongres Polaków w Republice Czeskiej*) is the umbrella organization of the Polish national minority in the Czech Republic. Its largest member is the Polish Association for Culture and Education (*PZKO*). As an organization safeguarding the interests of the Polish community in the Czech Republic, it brings together 30 Polish organizations, whose representatives form the Council of Representatives, the executive body of the Congress.

Shortly after the democratic revolution in 1989, the Congress was established under the name of the Polish Council in Český Těšín on 3 February 1990. It may be seen as a product of Václav Havel's concept of civil society. In line with this spirit, the Congress has emphasized building and maintaining strong relations with Poland, with particular attention to the use of the Polish language—especially, though not exclusively—in education. A pragmatic motivation drives this focus: as is the case for most European minorities, the Polish community in Zaolzie has faced steady pressures of assimilation over recent decades.

A novel and unprecedented development in minority support infrastructure was the establishment of the *Zaolzie Development Fund* in 2017. The fund emerged as one of the flagship outcomes of the strategic document "Vision 2035," a long-term development plan aiming to preserve Polish identity in the region. Unlike state-funded schemes, the Fund is backed by private sponsors, primarily from the Polish entrepreneurial elite, who have pledged long-term support through to 2035. Its creation marked a shift in approach—emphasizing internal community capacity and self-reliance (Böhm et al., 2023).

The Fund primarily supports projects in education, culture, and youth engagement. Scouting camps, school excursions to Poland, leadership programs, and sports tournaments are among the most visible initiatives. Travel to symbolically important locations such as Kraków, Warsaw, or the Baltic Sea plays a formative role in strengthening identity ties with the Polish homeland. Beyond these activities, the Fund has encouraged a more professionalized and imaginative civic culture among local activists, who are now more accustomed to operating in Polish and initiating more ambitious, community-rooted projects.

Despite these positive developments, challenges persist. The lack of structural autonomy and the uneven generational transfer of identity pose risks to the long-term vitality of the Polish minority. Integration with the broader Czech society is largely peaceful, but there remain tensions around symbolic representation, heritage preservation, and language use. European integration, particularly the Schengen regime and regional funding mechanisms, provides infrastructural and symbolic support but does not directly address

these minority-specific concerns. In the case of Zaolzie, community resilience thus relies more on local agency than on formal supranational protections (Böhm et al., 2023).

4.3 North and South Schleswig in the Danish-German borderland

Author: Martin Klatt

The Danish-German border region is defined as the former duchy of Schleswig, precisely as the Danish municipalities of Tønder, Haderslev, Aabenraa and Sønderborg and the German counties of Nordfriesland, Schleswig-Flensburg, the part of the county of Rendsburg-Eckernförde north of the Kiel Canal, the city of Flensburg and the part of the city of Kiel north of the Kiel Canal. The part of the region belonging to Denmark (North Schleswig) has a population of approximately 225,000 (March 2024), out of which an estimated 12,000-15,000 identify with the German minority. The part of the region belonging to Germany (South Schleswig) has a population of approximately 688,000 (Dec. 2022), of which an estimated 50,000 identify with the Danish minority. Minority affiliation is not recorded in any official data. The estimate is based on the rate of attendance of minority schools and has been stable over the last 30-40 years, except for a 10-20% increase in German minority school (in Denmark) attendance since 2020.

The Danish-German border region is characterized by its post WWI border settlement, where the geopolitical (border between the declining Danish and the rising German empire) as well as the linguistic-cultural-national conflict of the 19th century (the residents' individual affiliation with the dominant German cultural sphere or with the Danish national awakening) of the duchy of Schleswig was solved by dividing it between Denmark and Germany, in a division designed by Danish politicians and confirmed in a plebiscite. The dissenters of the plebiscite (about 25% in the part given to or reunited with Denmark, North Schleswig, had voted for Germany and 20% in the part remaining with Germany, South Schleswig, had voted for Denmark) were offered the opportunity to organize as recognized national minorities with a system of parallel institutions, primarily educational, but also other associations. Cultural and financial kin-state support is a vital element for the sustainability of these institutions. Unilateral, but reciprocal (and identical) governmental declarations of 1955 guarantee non-discrimination and subjective minority identification. Minority-majority relations have improved continuously since, with some setbacks based on conflicts of resources. Today, relations are considered best practice (Klatt, 2024).

No socio-economic data on the minorities is available as minority affiliation is not registered. The region's socioeconomic data reveals peripherality (regional GDP, income, level of education all below the national average), Still, there is no indication that this harms the minorities more than the majority population. Denmark joined the EC in 1973, and it has participated in Interreg from the very beginning. Schengen was implemented in 2001.

4.4 Southern Slovakia in the Hungarian-Slovak borderland

Author: Péter Balogh

Despite their small sizes, Slovakia and Hungary share a 676 km-long border, making it one of the longest intra-EU land boundaries and the longest shared border of both countries. The border itself was established by the Treaty of Trianon (1920). It moved again with the First Vienna Award (1938) but was largely restored to its pre-WWII delineation with the Paris Peace Treaties (1947), since which the demarcation has remained unchanged.

Unlike South Tyrol, southern Slovakia is not a coherent administrative-territorial unit but part of five (out of eight) large Slovakian Regions (*kraje)*. Nevertheless, southern Slovakia is present in political and public discourse not least since the country's largest ethno-linguistic minority – the Hungarians – is highly concentrated there. According to Slovakia's latest census (2021), 422,065 individuals declared Hungarian ethnicity (SOSR, 2021a) and 462,165 Hungarian as their native language (SOSR, 2021b). These figures are equal to the respective shares of 7.75% and 8.48% among Slovakia's population (5.45m). While both the absolute size and share of this community have slowly but gradually decreased compared to previous censuses, the recent figures imply that Hungarians still constitute the country's largest ethnic minority. The latter statement can be nuanced by the phenomenon that due to their stigmatisation, a number of people of Roma origin – whose official share is just 1.23% (SOSR, 2021a) – indicate either Slovak or Hungarian ethnicity in the censuses which leads to their numerical underestimation (Lášticová & Findor, 2016: 235).

Another reason for the strong presence of southern Slovakia in public discourse is its long-term lagging socio-economic position (together with the country's eastern areas) within Slovakia. Whether this owes more to the area's traditionally agricultural character or deliberate discrimination by national investment policy is a matter of debate but has long been lamented by the Hungarian minority (Smith, 2002; Balogh & Pete, 2018). Relatedly, the relatively stronger performance of some of Hungary's northern regions has further incentivised Slovakia Hungarians to orient toward those areas.

Since Slovakia's independence in 1993, issues related to the Hungarian minority have been the key – though obviously not the only – element of Slovak-Hungarian ties. The bilateral relations have seen their ups and downs (experiencing low points around 1993–1998 and 2006–2011, respectively) but have improved overall in recent years. This is largely thanks to the general post-1998 democratisation of Slovakia and the cautious but ongoing official bilingualisation process at least on the municipal level. At the same time, Hungary's now long-incumbent government has prioritised kinstate policy since 2010, when the country's citizenship law has been modified to allow a simplified naturalisation process largely for ethnic Hungarians in the neighbouring countries. As a response, Slovakia immediately banned dual citizenship for its citizens. A few Slovakia Hungarians have reportedly still obtained Hungarian passports, which first led to considerable tensions between the two states but was later downplayed by former Slovak President Čaputová (Pósa Homoly, 2019). Since 2023, Slovakia and Hungary are led by similarly minded governments which however has so far had few concrete impacts on the former's Hungarian minority.

In the context of the EU, the two countries' incumbent governments count as black sheep due to their frequent objections to mainstream Union policies and norms. Yet not just the two countries but also Slovakia's Hungarian minority are divided politically, with the latter's main political force (a party called Hungarian Alliance) being represented neither in the European nor in the Slovak Parliament but just on the local and regional levels. At the same time, since both countries joined the EU (2004), and the Schengen Area (2007), cross-border mobility has intensified, with many bridges having been (re)built – with considerable EU support – along the rivers Danube and Ipel' which constitute a long section of the joint border. Accordingly, the openness of internal Schengen borders is hugely appreciated by Slovakia Hungarians, but less so their experience of the EU's inaction regarding autochthonous minority rights.

4.5 Western Thrace in the Greek-Bulgarian-Turkish borderland

Authors: Martin Klatt, Petranka Nedelcheva

This case study focuses on the area inhabited by the Turkish-speaking minority centered around the cities of Xanthi and Komotini in Greece. The region belonged to the Ottoman Empire until the First Balkan War (1912), when it came under Bulgarian rule. After World War I, it was ceded to Greece. The Turkish population of Thrace was exempted from the population exchange regulated by the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923. This treaty still remains the only legal basis of minority protection for the Turkish minority, Greece has neither ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, nor the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. Greece does not allow NGOs or associations named "Turkish". Organizations as the Xanthi Turkish Union (1927), Komotini Turkish Youth Union (1928) and Western Thrace Turkish Teachers Union (1936) were dissolved in 1986, and no association which bears the word "Turkish" has been registered since. Our research was facilitated by the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe, registered in Germany as NGO for Turks who have migrated from Western Thrace.

Currently, Greece only applies minority status to Muslims living in Western Thrace as religious minority according to the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923. Greece does not accept their status as national Turkish minority. Greece has signed but not ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and has not signed the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. According to the official data of Greece, Western Thrace Turks are estimated at 49,000 comprising half of the total Muslim population of the region of 98,000. Unofficial data though suggests a higher number of the Turkish population between 130,000 and 150,000 according to the socio-cultural organizations in Western Thrace (FUEN, nd.).

The border between Greece and Bulgaria was fenced and militarized during the Cold War, interrupting the local populations' contacts and rural herding habits. Greek-Turkish relations have been difficult since 1923, not least because of the trauma of the population exchange. The Cyprus crisis of 1975 and the establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (only recognized by Türkiye) in 1983 have furthermore complicated the relationship and the situation of the Turkish minority in Greece (as well as the Greek minority in Istanbul).

Greece joined the EC in 1981, Bulgaria in 2004. Türkiye has candidate status, but membership negotiations have been stalled. Bulgaria became a full member of Schengen in 2025 (after the field research conducted by B-SHAPES). The border to Türkiye is thus an EU external border. There has been an Interreg program BG-TR-GR, but it appears to be inactive. Migratory pressures have resulted in a militarization/fencing of the border to Türkiye.

5. Case Study Reports

5.1 Italian-Austrian Borderland

Authors: Alice Engl, Johanna Mitterhofer, Marcus Nicolson

The 17 young South Tyrolians who participated in our interviews and zine-making workshops, aged 18-31, were all members of the German-speaking minority, and born and raised within 10 km of the Austrio-Italian border. Some of the participants were socially or politically active in their community: three were involved in local politics, three were part of the same local feminist group. Nine had attended university, most of them abroad, and were now employed. Eight participants were currently attending the final class of the local high school. In short, all of them had grown up in a Europe characterized by open borders, with a Schengen border in their close vicinity that had only been closed once during their lifetime, in the COVID-19-pandemic. They all had direct experiences of the freedom this offered, travelling extensively and spending, or planning to spend, periods of study as Erasmus students in other European countries. At the same time, they all had relatives who had experienced and remembered the border controls of pre-Schengen times, and great-grandparents who had lived through the effects of shifting borders after WW1. These direct and indirect personal experiences of bordering processes shaped the ways in which the young research participants presented their narratives on borders and on Europe, as will be presented in the next sections.

Narratives on the border

The young minority borderlanders experience the state border as physically open and somewhat “invisible” in their everyday lives. Nonetheless, the border remains symbolically powerful and continues to influence their practices. When discussing borders, language emerges as a more tangible divider than the state border, reinforcing cultural boundaries that persist beyond lines on the map.

The invisible state border

Most research participants described the state border as invisible. They perceive the border as simply existing without strong political or emotional weight. This perception reflects a de-politicized and practical understanding of the border, where it functions more as a formality than a barrier. This perception points to a post-Schengen mindset, in which the presence of the border is acknowledged, but it no longer imposes significant constraints or obstacles.

The participants in the zine-making workshops generally approached the topic of borders conceptually or symbolically, rather than as a lived, local experience, representing borders metaphorically using images of fences, walls, or barbed wire, and choosing images of securitized borders far. This was described as far from the lived reality of the open border between Austria and Italy.

In their day-to-day lives, participants only ever noticed the existence of the border through banal instances such as changing traffic signs or phone signals upon crossing into Austria:

> *It doesn't actually exist. Unless we have a global pandemic, it's effectively not there. ... Only when you're on the phone, the conversation stops for a moment, that's the only thing.* (ST_1)

However, the invisibility of the border cannot be equated with a perception of the borderland as borderless. Very few interviewees regularly crossed the border and if they did, it was most often for a quick shopping trip. Interestingly, interviewees described that their cross-border movements and relationships had decreased over the years: with the increase of both petrol and food prices, there were few incentives to cross the border anymore. A degree of detachment from the people and places across the border characterised the interviewees' narrations. Indeed, the linguistic and cultural proximity of Eastern Tyrol to South Tyrol rarely emerged as strong social or emotional incentives to cross the border. While there were some reflections on identity — especially around South Tyrolean identity and a sense of belonging that transcends or is complicated by borders — there was a notable absence of personal relationships or meaningful connections that cross the border. The Austro-Italian border, while barely perceived by the interviewees, thus continues to demarcate people's spaces of everyday action and interaction.

Very few of the research participants mentioned direct personal memories or experiences related to the nearby state border. When such memories were present, they typically revolved around leisure activities such as shopping trips across the border or hiking in the mountains, rather than interpersonal or cultural connections (see image 1).

> *A few years ago, we used to go to the border to fill up with petrol and diesel, because it was significantly cheaper. Since the coronavirus, that's no longer the case. We also like to go shopping in Sillian, because there are various grocery stores there that are not available in the immediate vicinity… Otherwise, we don't go to Austria that often, maybe to go up a mountain, but otherwise there are no specific reasons.* (ST_5)

> *I think you can still feel a border there, because the coexistence between South Tyrol and East Tyrol is not really cross-regional, and although you would have the opportunity, you don't [cross/interact].* (ST_2)

Image 1: Zine image showing everyday cross-border activities, including hiking and skiing, with the words 'No Border' to show how the local border remains open in these mountain areas

Some participants made references to family memories involving the border, particularly in the context of past border crossings or smuggling. In these instances, the idea of the border is preserved more through familial memory than direct personal experience. The frequent use of historical images in the zines may

further indicate that borders are primarily associated with the past and not directly related to contemporary experience (see image 2).

Image 2: Zine images made using black and white photos to signify historical closed borders, including border stones, barbed wire, and checkpoint offices

Several participants also mentioned international travel, but even these reflections tended to focus on the mechanics of border crossings rather than emotional or relational aspects. Only a few participants associated borders with humanitarian or migration-related narratives, possibly reflecting the extent to which open borders are normalized and taken for granted by young people in this region.

Image 3: Image displaying the text ‘No Border Crossing without Control’

Overall, the findings suggest that while the border is a recognizable and sometimes symbolic theme for young people in South Tyrol rooted in local history and family memory, it does not evoke strong personal or emotional associations. For most, the local border “simply is there”.

Border as a site of opportunity

A number of interviewees viewed the border not as a limiting or restricting factor, but rather as a place of opportunity: The border can always be crossed, and that in itself is understood as the embodiment of freedom. But also, more concretely, the border allows South Tyrolians to differentiate themselves against

what is on the other side of the border, with benefits for the local economy, particularly the tourist industry, but also in terms of identity, as the following quote shows:

> *I think of a border as a place of opportunity, because it seems to me that we are more likely to encounter opportunities than to be restricted, especially with the barrier-free crossing between the border of Austria and Italy. [...] For me, that is just a feeling of freedom, when I can just go wherever I want, because I don't think about it, okay, now I could get to Austria. I just go and that is already a place of possibilities.* (ST_5)

Borders and minority identity: The perception of the language border as the "real" border

When reflecting on the meaning and significance of borders, participants frequently referred to language borders. For many, the "real" border was not the state border nearby, but the internal regional border, which also marks a linguistic separation between the predominantly German-speaking province of South Tyrol and the Italian-speaking region Veneto:

> *When I think of the [Austrian] border, I would say that the culture and language are pretty much the same. [...] But when I think of Belluno [in Veneto], it's totally different. The culture is very different there; the traditions are different, the language is different, and that's where I really notice the real border.* (ST_3)

While many interviewees identified as Italian citizens, some highlighted the recurring instances of othering, even alienation, when meeting people belonging to the (Italian-speaking) national minority, particularly in the context of encounters with, or as, tourists, when their imperfect Italian was commented on or even criticised.

> *I was on holiday in Calabria two years ago and we were in a hotel. Then we went into the reception, and the receptionist asked us if we were from Germany. It's difficult for them to communicate down there. With us, they have the advantage that they can speak German with us.* (ST_1)

> *I was once in the south of Italy, at an Italian championship. Then I asked them if they didn't know where that (South Tyrol) was. Then they really scolded me for not knowing Italian when I'm already Italian. But the fact that we speak German here was half the end of the world for them. So, they didn't really know it anymore. So that was weird.* (ST_6)

The interviews reveal a sense of a distinctive collective South Tyrolean identity. Influenced by Italian and Austrian/Tyrolean culture, it does not fully align with either of these national narratives. Indeed, there is a sense of detachment from dominant national narratives, reflecting a desire to preserve and assert a unique South Tyrolean identity, which for many interviewees translated into a sense of being "in between" – embracing elements of both cultures while maintaining a distinct regional character. This fosters a sense of local pride and reinforces a feeling of belonging to a self-defined community different from both the Italian and the Austrian ones.

> *We are a border area and identity... I don't feel that I really belong to the Italian border area or the Austrian border area. I just am. When someone asks me where I come from, which was often the case when I was abroad, I said Italy at first. At some point I said I was from Austria, because it was easier for people to understand, because nobody really knew what South Tyrol was. And at some*

> *point, I formed an identity within myself. We come from such a unique place. I am a South Tyrolean. We are the ones in the north of Italy. A small minority. And we are proud to be this minority.* (ST_6)

Narratives on Europe

Participant narratives on Europe were also more nuanced than we had first hypothesized. Born mostly after the Schengen Agreement became effective at the local-state border, the young participants' first association with Europe was free movement across borders. Indeed, the main themes related to Europe identified in the participants' narratives include free movement and the resulting opportunities, as well as the role of the European Union for minorities.

Europe as an opportunity

Research participants tended to have a positive view of the European Union, highlighting the opportunities the EU provides particularly in terms of free movement within the Schengen area, related to travelling and EU initiatives such as the Erasmus program, as well as economic opportunities.

Image 4: Zine image showing the European Union flag which was elaborated on in discussion and during the interviews.

Various interviewees juxtaposed the free movement of European citizens with the restrictions placed on Third Country Nationals and at Europe's external borders, emphasizing the selective nature of a borderless Europe, and related it to their own experience of closed borders during the pandemic:

> *You realise in such situations that the EU project, although it started with a great idea of opening up across borders, each country still works for itself.* (ST_1)

Despite the generally very positive outlook on Europe, interviewees also noted the limitations of the EU, its inefficiency and its distance from the everyday life of EU citizens. Various interviewees maintained that there could be more European influence and less borders as the following quote shows:

> *Personally, I think the EU is a great project, but we don't give the EU enough chances because everyone is afraid of getting too little or the others getting too much.* (ST_2)

Europe as a protector of minorities

A core theme that emerged in multiple interviews was the EU's role in protecting national minorities from potential threats from the central state:

> *Well, I think that for us, the EU is primarily an additional protection, to keep Italy from coming up with very, very stupid ideas, to put it that way. Simply because Italy is then once again interwoven into this construct of states, and that of course makes it much more difficult to say that 'I'm now going to do something that may not be good and beneficial.' And luckily, I think we currently have a mood throughout Europe that is rather humane and perhaps also minority friendly.* (ST_1)

The relationship of minorities with the EU was also defined in economic or financial terms, with one interviewee highlighting how minorities may benefit financially from the EU:

> *The advantages definitely outweigh the disadvantages for South Tyrol and also what we minorities can make of it. I have seen that we, because we are a minority, always get funding for certain projects, for bridge building, road construction, forestry, etc. We gladly accept everything, we always want to look ahead, keep going, keep going. And yes, when we receive something through our status, I always say yes, I'm happy to accept it!* (ST_6)

Europe in the Background

Many participants were born in the late 1990s or early 2000s, and hence their view on Europe has not been shaped by any major integration narratives related to borders and de-bordering, such as the abolition of border controls through the Schengen Agreement or the introduction of the euro as a common currency. While they recognize Europe as an important framework, they view it as something normal that has always been there in their lives.

> *I just think that I am having a hard time with these questions because the EU is so logical for us, because we were simply born into the EU, our generation, that it is not really thought about. Okay, we live in the EU. What is the EU good for? What if it didn't exist? What was it like before? We don't know. We were just born into it, and it simply existed from the beginning. We learned in school about what the EU is and why it should be good or bad for us. And that has always just been the case, so I don't think young people think much about what the EU does for them. Because it has always just been there for as long as they can remember.* (ST_6)

Other research participants argued that many of their contemporaries were unaware of the many advantages and opportunities brought by the EU, which may contribute to a certain degree of Euroscepticism they observed among young colleagues and classmates:

> *The younger generations don't really know what [border controls] mean [...] I think we only appreciate many things when they are restricted. We have been given the great gift of open borders, and we don't really appreciate it...* (ST_2)

Comparison of individual young adults' narratives with public narratives in local media

In this section we contrast the results gathered in our research interviews and workshop with those from the findings from the minority newspaper analysis conducted in the first phase of the project (Engl et al. 2024). A comparison of the media narratives analyzed in South Tyrol and the narratives of young members of minorities reveal that borders are generally perceived as a less emotive issue by young people than in

minority media. The young participants displayed a more pragmatic and depoliticized stance that diverges from the more dramatized or ideologically charged portrayals in *Dolomiten* newspaper. Furthermore, it appears that borders have less relevance in young people's everyday lives than in the media we studied earlier, suggesting a disconnect between traditional media narratives and young people's lived experience.

Rather than viewing borders as sites of division, or rigid structures of exclusion, our research participants tend to frame them as fluid opportunities—resources for mobility, personal growth, or leisure. This interpretation is reinforced by their reactions to "crisis moments", such as the COVID-19 pandemic and 'migration crisis'. While minority media put a strong emphasis on these, research participants rarely perceived these as crises. The absence of strong emotional or political responses to such events could indicate a form of distancing from macro-level narratives that feel removed from personal relevance. References to these "crises" are rarely brought up in discussions, underscoring the limited impact such media frames have on the everyday consciousness of young people.

The local border featured heavily in media narratives but appeared to be less relevant to young South Tyrolians, who crossed it infrequently and associated it primarily with particular moments of leisure, such as mountain hikes. This utilitarian and recreational view suggests that local borders are stripped of their historic-political weight in the eyes of the youth, becoming instead markers of lifestyle or nature rather than identity or conflict. Their reflections on borders included, instead, abstract and general reflections of borders. This abstraction may signal a conceptual rather than experiential relationship with the idea of the border. Borders are intellectually acknowledged but rarely felt in tangible ways. Significantly, while national borders featured heavily in their narratives, the intra-state linguistic border between South Tyrol and nearby Veneto, and between the German-speaking minority and the national majority, constituted another central theme. This focus on internal cultural and linguistic boundaries over geopolitical borders points to the persistent salience of identity politics at the regional level, even in an otherwise globalized or border-transcending youth culture.

The idea of a cross-border Tyrolean imagined community or identity, central to media narratives on borders, is largely absent from interviewees' narratives. Border-crossing as a daily and local act is not significantly present. Instead, there is a greater relevance of crossing other (European) borders for purposes such as traveling, studying, and working. This shift indicates a reorientation of spatial imaginaries from the local to the European scale, reflecting a mobility-based identity in which Europe, not the region, becomes the dominant frame of reference.

Finally, regarding narratives of Europe, the media and the narratives of young people are similar: in both cases, the European Union is framed in rather positive terms, particularly regarding free movement, while remaining a somewhat distant entity. The EU is seen as an institution that cares about, and for, minorities rather than a community or a common identity. Even in times of crises, such as during the pandemic re-bordering, the EU's role in managing the crisis was not critically addressed.

This convergence suggests that while the EU is viewed as generally beneficial, it also fails to inspire a strong sense of emotional belonging. For these young people who grew up in, and with, a Europe with open Schengen borders, the EU was largely taken for granted rather than an issue that merits conscious reflection, pointing to a 'banal Europeanism'. The normalization of European integration among youth may reflect the

success of the Schengen project in embedding itself in daily routines, but it also raises questions about the depth of European identity and the potential fragility of support in times of institutional or political strain.

5.2 Polish-Czech Borderland

Authors: Elżbieta Opiłowska, Hynek Böhm

In the zine-making workshop and interviews, 22 young members of the Polish minority in the Czech Republic, aged 18 to 20, participated. The gender was balanced, consisting of 12 female and 10 male research participants. They were all students, primarily attending Polish minority schools in the region. While all had completed or were completing their secondary education, their levels of engagement in Polish minority organisations varied. Some were active in cultural or folklore groups, while others did not participate in formal minority structures. The zine-making workshop took place in Polish language, on 25th June 2024 at the Pedagogical Centre for Polish National Education (Centrum Pedagogiczne dla Polskiego Szkolnictwa Narodowościowego) in Český Těšín. The interviews were conducted in two rounds, in December 2024 and February 2025, in various informal settings, ensuring a comfortable environment for discussion. They were conducted in the Silesian dialect, which reflects the participants' strong regional identity and bilingual background.

Participant experiences with personal mobility were predominantly shaped by the open-border environment of the Schengen area. Many crossed the Polish-Czech border on a regular basis for shopping, leisure, or visiting family members. Unlike previous generations, they did not perceive the border as a significant obstacle but rather as a normal part of everyday life.

In terms of self-identification, all participants were from the region and expressed a strong regional identity and identification with Zaolzie—the historical region they inhabit—rather than strictly as Polish or Czech. While Polish culture and language played a significant role in their upbringing, their perception of their identity was regional rather than national. However, two interviewees expressed a weaker connection to their minority status, stating that they did not actively reflect on their Polish identity in their daily lives.

Narratives on Borders

The border is part of the lived experience of research participants. It emerged in three forms: as a connector, as a historical dividing line, and as a marker of regional identity.

Narrative of the Border as a Bridge for Everyday Practices

For research participants, the predominant association with the border is the river Olza, which is perceived as close to the region, symbolising the Zaolzie region (Zaolzie means behind the river Olza) and part of everyday experience, as shown in the following quote: "I chose the Olza, it is the first association [with the border] in this region of Zaolzie. It is a symbol of our region". (PLCZ_Zine_workshop)

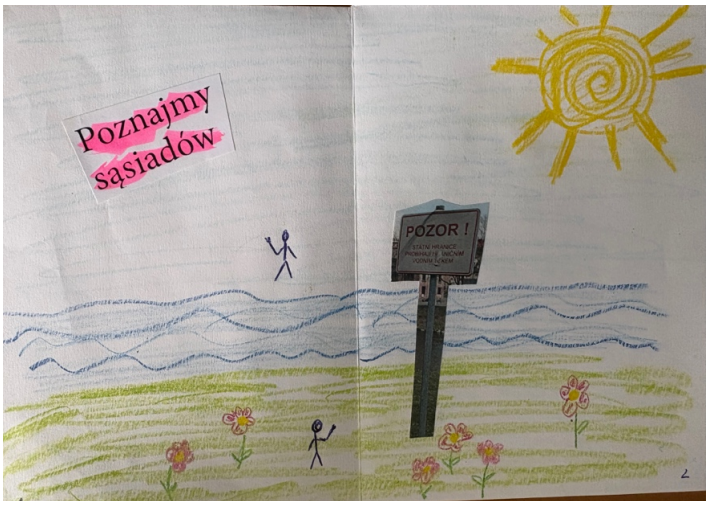

Image 1: The Olza River and the inscription: *Let's get to know our neighbours*

Thus, the majority of respondents viewed the Czech-Polish border not as a line of division but as a space of connection. The Olza River, historically seen as a symbolic border, was frequently mentioned as a bridge - an integrating element rather than a barrier. Many participants emphasized the fluidity of movement across the border and the social ties that transcend national divisions. Most of them frequently do their shopping on the Polish side of the border.

Other visual associations with the border selected in zine-making workshop were 'a road' and 'the EU flag' to emphasize again connection more than separation. The locally experienced border was seen as the Schengen border, which is invisible and intangible because it can be easily crossed.

> *For me, the border is not really there. I cross it every week when I go shopping or visit my relatives.* (PLCZ_1)
> *The border is just a bridge. It doesn't divide us; it connects us. It's normal to live in both places at once.* (PLCZ_3)

Some participants juxtaposed this open border with the heavily securitized Polish-Belarusian border. They used the photo of a barbed wire fence and border guards protecting the border to contrast this situation with open borders in their region, adding the caption: "You should remember and not forget".

Image 2: The securitized Polish-Belarusian border

This could be interpreted in two ways: first, that open borders in the EU are valuable; second, that there are still closed borders that need to be guarded and "The European Union helps Poland".

Narrative of Historical Border

Although young, the interviewees showed historical awareness of border changes in the region. They emphasised the historical development of borders from a wall with entry prohibitions to open borders in Europe associated with freedom and unrestricted mobility. The collective memory of families also played a role here in transmitting previous experiences. One participant of the zine-making workshop stated: "*my mum always told me how illegal it was and how difficult it was to cross [the Polish-Czech border] to the other side*".

By referring to the family stories about the difficulties of crossing the border in the past, the participants reinforced the idea that the current open-border system is something to be valued and protected. Some participants also used the historical reference to past conflicts to highlight border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions that disrupted their routine mobility:

> "*I remember when we couldn't cross the border because of COVID. That was strange—it felt unnatural, like something was taken away from us*." (PLCZ_6)

In participatory workshop images and headlines related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the border closure were used extensively. It was presented as a threat to open borders and cross-border cooperation between Poles and Czechs. The famous banners with the slogans "I miss you, Czech" and "And I miss you, Pole" (pictured in "Głos"), which were displayed on both sides of the border during the COVID-19 border closure, were used in the zine creations to illustrate the "border drama".

Image 3: Banner: *I miss you, Czech*, displayed during the pandemic Covid-19 on the Polish side of the Olza River

Narrative of Zaolzie Identity

Seeing the border as a connector, the borderland is perceived accordingly as a unique place to live, a homeland that the participants want to defend. One interviewee even used a quotation from the poem by Polish writer Maria Konopnicka: "To the last drop from our veins we will defend our homeland", but with the comment that "*radical patriotism is not necessarily a positive phenomenon in border areas and can lead to conflicts between minorities*". The uniqueness of Zaolzie is linked to the Silesian dialect ("po naszymu"): "*What you are thinking about is in our language, not Polish, not Czech, not European, but our language, Zaolzie, because we live in Těšín*." (PLCZ_Zine workshop)

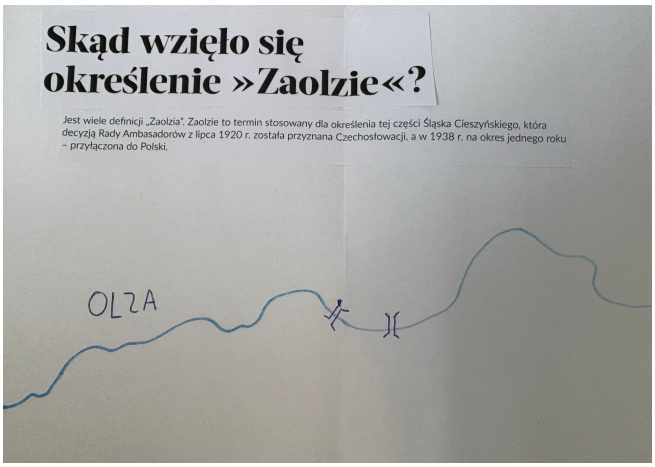

Image 4: Drawing of the Olza River and the explanation of the origin of the name of the Zaolzie region

The strength of the Zaolzie lies in its language and culture, which combine Polish and Czech heritage. They are proud of their language and tradition and express a strong regional identity rather than the Polish and Czech expressions of identity – which is similar to the feelings of young people identified in South Tyrol. When they were pushed to choose, they most often stated “I am Zaolziak and Pole.” Two of the respondents claimed that they feel a certain distance from the (Czech) majority society towards their Polishness. Only one participant claimed that she has recently started to increasingly self-identify as Czech. The borderland was described as a unique multicultural space that does not fit into a single national category. One zine workshop participant used the headline "The Union had to understand" (Unia musi zrozumieć) to emphasise

the unique situation of the border area and of Zaolzie, which is a microcosm of the Polish and Czech heritage rooted in the dialect that constitutes their identity. This point was emphasized by other participants in the interviews we conducted:

> *I don't feel only Polish or only Czech. I feel like I am from Zaolzie. It is something different, something special.* (PLCZ_3)
>
> *Our dialect is what makes us unique. It's not Polish, not Czech, but ours*. (PLCZ_4)
>
> *Minorities have something to be proud of; language, patriotism, memories, culture, let's not forget!* (PLCZ_Zine workshop)

However, the recent national tensions between Poland and Czech Republic were also mentioned by the workshop participants. One of the zine booklets was entitled "Battle about Turów" (the Turów brown coal mine in Bogatynia), which made headlines in the Polish and Czech media.[4] Using the headlines in Polish, "Hands off Turów" (Łapy precz od Turowa) and in Czech "Hundreds of people against Turów??" (Stovky lidi proti Turowu), the author presented the Polish-Czech conflict with the comment that Polish-Czech relations had deteriorated.

Narratives on Europe

Europe was largely perceived by the participants through the lens of the Schengen area as an area of opportunities, freedom of mobility, and EU funds that promote the development of the border area, which corresponds to their experience of living, and growing up in, Europe with open borders.

Narrative of Europe as Space of Freedom and Opportunity

Europe was predominantly viewed in a pragmatic perspective, in relation to the Schengen area and free movement. Interviewees saw the EU as a practical framework that allows them to live a cross-border lifestyle without restrictions: "*Thanks to the EU, we can move freely. It's normal for us to go to Poland for coffee and to the Czech Republic for school.*" (PLCZ_8)

Some respondents also linked Europe to economic opportunities, citing EU funding for local projects as a positive influence on the region: "*The EU helps develop our region. We have better roads, better schools, thanks to EU money*." (PLCZ_3)

Narrative of Europe as a Distant Institution

[4] In May 2021, the European Court of Justice ordered the Polish government to immediately stop mining at the Turów lignite mine in Bogatynia because of its negative impact on the environment, embroiling the border region in a tense dispute between Warsaw, Prague and Brussels for many months. The Czech government claimed that the Polish coal mine was lowering the groundwater level on its side of the border, while the Polish government saw the complaint to the ECJ as a blow to thousands of jobs in the mine, the power station and the local economy, and a threat to the energy needs of the whole country. The Turów issue became entangled in major international politics, became one of the most heated issues in the Polish political campaign, and was regularly covered by the national media.

While the Schengen area and mobility were seen as tangible benefits of European integration, the EU as an institution felt distant to many participants. Two interviewees heavily critisised the Green Deal as an artificial initiative damaging the European integration idea.

Although the participants acknowledged the EU‘s role in maintaining open borders, they did not express a strong emotional connection to European identity:

> *I don't really think about the EU in my daily life. It's just there.* (PLCZ_5)

> *Europe is useful, but I feel more connected to Zaolzie than to some abstract European identity.* (PLCZ_7)

Even if some workshop participants used the headline "Neither Polish nor Czech - Tešin - Cieszyn - European" (Ani polski, ani czeski - Tešin - Cieszyn europejski) from "Głos" newspaper for the cover of their zine booklets, it was not to emphasise their identification with Europe, but to go beyond the national struggles over the twin city's affiliation. One zine played with the same headline, directly adding "not European, but ours in Zaolzie".

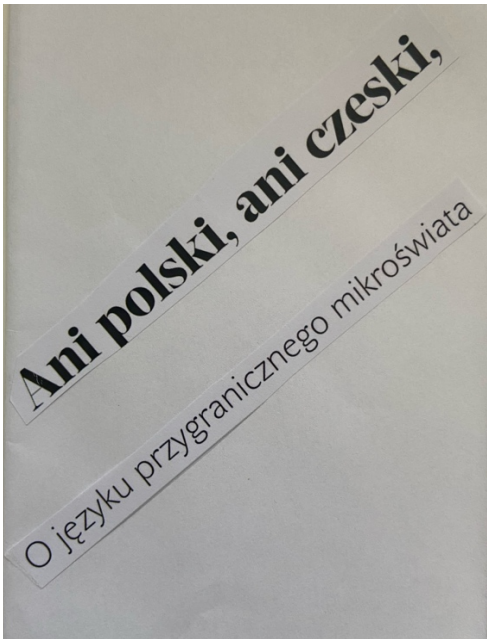

Image 5: Inscription *Neither Polish nor Czech – on the language of the borderland microcosm*

Narrative of Defending Open Borders

Despite the general lack of deep political engagement, some participants expressed concerns about potential threats to Schengen freedom, especially in the context of recent border debates within the EU. They emphasised that open borders should not be taken for granted:

> *If we lose Schengen, we lose part of our identity. We are a borderland; we need open borders.* (PLCZ_1)

> One respondent referenced the recent ‘migrant crisis’ and debates over stricter border controls, showing awareness that European border policies are evolving: "*Some politicians want to close borders again. That would be a disaster for us.*" (PLCZ_3)

Comparison of individual young adults’ narratives with public narratives in local media

Like the narratives retrieved from minority newspaper *Głos*, (Engl et al., 2024) which primarily referred to the border in its local context - as a fence during the COVID-19 pandemic or as a past bridge for local initiatives and the area of economic cooperation - the border was also perceived through a local lens in the zine-making workshop and interviews. The border was strongly associated with the river Olza, which young people regularly cross. Crossing the border is part of their daily life, a practice that has been normalised. As the media analysis showed, the border closure and restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic were a shock for the border area. This experience and assessment were also expressed in the participants’ zines and interviews. The sudden border closures disrupted young people's daily routines but were also interpreted as threatening Schengen.

The open borders in the Schengen area are part of their identity, as was directly expressed by the interviewees. Against this background, in the media narratives, interviews, and the zine-making workshop, the border is perceived as a bridge, a connecting space, rather than a source of division. Moreover, the very local focus of *Głos* could be compared to the strong regional identity of our interviewees, which supersedes a strict Polish or Czech national affiliation. They feel a sense of belonging to the Zaozie region, of which they are proud, which is also manifested in speaking the local dialect and belonging to folklore groups. The use of dialect allows them to escape the bi-national, Czech-Polish categorization and to express the third identity rooted in regional history and heritage. Even if they referred to the history of the division of the border region, it was not seen as an obstacle for the borderlanders living here.

Regarding identified narratives of Europe, the media and vernacular narratives of minority youth are also similar. In general, references to Europe were made mainly in relation to the Schengen area. Europe is seen as a practical framework for mobility but not necessarily as an identity. A Europe with open Schengen borders is taken for granted. As in *Głos*, Europe is in the shadows here, offering opportunities but not defining the identity of our interviewees. However, they perceived the achievements of European integration - the ability to travel without restrictions - as a value worth defending.

As in the case of the media analysis, the re-bordering associated with COVID-19, rather than a 'migration crisis', was a lived experience of young minority members that had shaken their certainty about open borders as a matter of course. They expressed concerns about the future of open borders, reflecting a growing awareness of political debates within the EU.

In conclusion, it can be argued that young minority members have internalized an expression of everyday, banal Europeanism in the Czech-Polish borderland. Their strong regional identity is rooted in the cross-border region, allowing them to avoid national categorization. For them, Europe is not an ideology but an everyday social practice.

5.3 Danish-German Borderland

Author: Martin Klatt

The data collected here stem from a zine workshop, a discussion about "Europe", and six interviews. The zine-making workshop was held on 19 August 2024 with a group of high school students (grade 12) from Deutsches Gymnasium Nordschleswig (the German language high school of the German minority in Denmark) at the Jugendbildungsstätte Knivsberg, an educational boarding school-like retreat in North Schleswig operated by the German minority's youth organization (Deutscher Jugendverband Nordschleswig). This setting ensured confidentiality as well as familiarity, as the participants had been there before at other events and knew the facility well.

In effect, some of the German minority high school students resided in Germany, commuting to school, and some had only recently migrated to Denmark from Germany. This diversity reflects the situation at the German minority high school, which, according to an assessment of its principal, is attended by ca. one third of students from core minority families, one third of students from local Danish families and Germans who have migrated to the region from Germany, and one third of students commuting from Germany, who often have attended a Danish minority school before. Interestingly enough, one of the interviewed Danish minority members consequently talked about the Danish-German minority *(det dansk-tyske mindretal)* (DKDE_1).

Zines were produced along a headline the students had drawn previously out of ten different headlines from the media analysis (D4.1) of the two minority language newspapers in the region (Der Nordschleswiger and Flensborg Avis) selected to reflect the different codes used in the media analysis. Zines were produced for all ten headlines. Almost all students were productive and creative in producing a zine. Only one student had difficulties with the task and produced an incomplete zine. A few others commented that they would have preferred to produce a free zine – without a chosen/drawn headline from the media analysis. The zines reflect that all participants had specific border experiences and documented that the border was a factor shaping their perception of the border region, cross-border living and their specific borderland minority situation.

Narratives on the border

The high school students of the German minority as well as the interviewed university students of the Danish minority have all experienced the Danish-German (and other EU-borders) as open, most have crossed it frequently in their daily lives for educational purposes, work, and leisure activities, especially family visits and shopping. The Danish-German border is an important factor shaping their perceptions of belonging.

> *It's not just a border* (DKDE_1)

The students had no or only distant memories on the special situation of migration in autumn 2015, but all remembered the closures from March-May 2020, which had an impact on all informers. The border was a key theme in the interviews and in all zines, showing that the students here had a personal relationship with different aspects of the border in the region.

Narrative of the Border as a Bridge of Everyday Practices

Even though hardly physically visible, quite a few mentioned that they perceive the border crossing as a change of system, language and culture – even on a personal base:

> *But I feel a bit like it also feels a bit strange. I mean, I know when I drive into Germany that I am in Germany. I don't know what it is, but I can definitely feel that I just crossed the border.* (DKDE_2)

While this young Danish minority member felt very conscious about which side of the border she was on, generally participants tended to perceive the border as "just there". Their minority background has induced them to cross the border regularly for private activities, as well as education- and work-related activities. Many perceive the local border as an open border with lots of opportunities, especially for them as members of borderland national minorities. Some perceive it even as a best practice case and role model for other border regions; which is in line with the narrative spread by key stakeholders in the region (Klatt, 2024). While in general this applies to all informants, both from the Danish minority in Germany and the German minority in Denmark, there is a perception of difference and soft discrimination in the interview narratives. These perceptions are about being othered by the Danish majority in form of being ridiculed or teased as Nazis (German minority in Denmark) or not accepted as real Danish (Danish minority in Germany).

Narrative of the border as opportunity

Narratives of the border as a site of opportunity emerged frequently in the interviews but not so much in the zines. Interviewees generally felt that it was an advantage to live in a border region with an open border and to grow up in a national minority with a kinstate on the other side.

> *Living on the border is advantageous because it makes you feel close to both countries and you don't live so isolated in the interior [of a country]* (DKDE_3)

Youth from the Danish minority (who all had left high school some years before) were especially keen on mentioning the perceived better education opportunities in Denmark.

For the students from the German minority, the aspect of cross-border shopping was relevant and practiced regularly as a key opportunity. One informant from the Danish minority mentioned that border-crossing opened up student job opportunity (working in one of the supermarkets catering specifically for customers in Denmark). This reflects the professionalized cross-border shopping structures of the region, resulting mainly from a continuous, sectoral price level difference between the two countries.

> *I chose this picture of the supermarket with the border shop. I do that a lot. I like these cheap things. In our family, we usually make it a fun outing. We all go together, then we eat, then we shop, and then we drive home.* (DKDE_3)(speaks Danish in the discussion)

Image 1: Zine image showing the 'return' to normal border life after the COVID-19 pandemic: shopping and the beach.

One student from the German minority also mentioned the possibility to cross-border commute to high school as a great opportunity.

Narratives of the border as a site of control

A dominant theme in the interviews, the zines, and the discussion was border control. Overall, narratives were critical of border control at the local border (Denmark-Germany), while some informants voiced understanding for the need to control other borders, which represented more conflictual settings, such as the US-Mexican border and external EU borders. The zines were critical of border control in general, expressed in different ways. Referring to the two periods of crisis used in the media analysis, it became clear that the informants did not or only faintly remembered the so-called 'migration crisis' of autumn-winter 2015-16, but they did remember the impact of the border closures induced by the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, as well as the insecurity during the restricted re-opening from summer 2020. Some of the research participants felt themselves to be privileged because of dual citizenship, or as German citizens residing in Denmark – these persons could always leave their country of residence to enter their country of citizenship. Others faced challenges when attending education facilities on the other side of the border, as well as complicated rules on exemptions from the general travel ban.

The "temporary" border controls introduced in January 2016, relaxed in summer 2023, but still in effect when entering Denmark, as well as recently introduced border controls by Germany, are widely considered out of proportion, and some students recounted experiences of racial profiling by the police when picking out cars for inspection. A general sense of insecurity about border controls was mentioned by several participants. It was also mentioned that border controls pose the risk of constructing borders in people's minds and increasing stereotypes:

> I*f you start controlling at the border, you imply that something about this country is criminal, or something bad is coming from there, that you do not want to have in your country, and this builds up stereotypes against the people of that country* (DKDE_4)

Narrative of the border as a fence/security device

The direct association of the border as a fence was not very present in the interviews, as the informants had not experienced crossing fenced borders. A special feature at the Danish-German border is a wild boar fence constructed unilaterally by Denmark in 2019 to prevent transmission of the African Swine Fever into the Danish pork production industry. The fence, about 1.5 m in height, covers the whole land border and is the first visible demarcation/fencing of the border, except for a short period after WWII. It does not hinder free movement of people, as there are gates even at small paths crossing the border. Nevertheless, the fence caused widespread anger in the region (Eilenberg and Harrisson, 2023). It was featured in several of the zines and described as an intrusion into the cross-border landscape, setting parallels to other border fences.

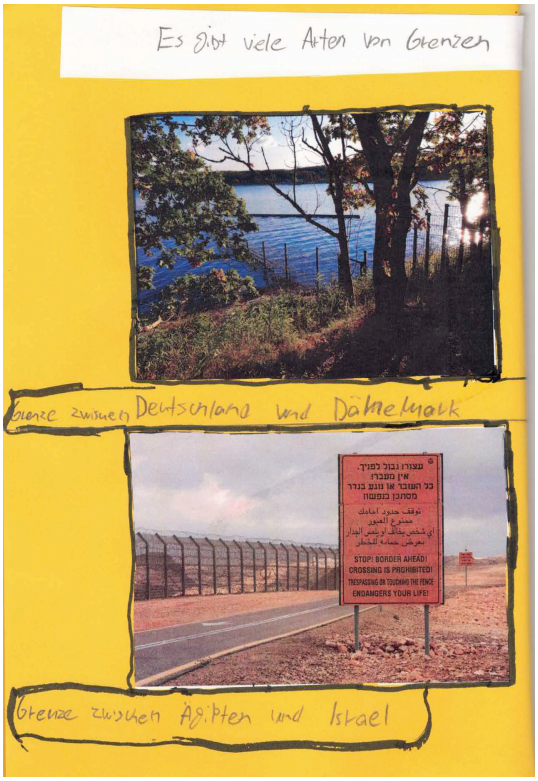

Image 2: the Wild Boar fence at the Danish-German border dividing a nature idyl, and the fenced and militarized border between Israel and Egypt in the Sinai/Negev. Both reflect a securitized approach to borders, cutting traditional lifeways of wildlife (DE-DK) and Bedouins (IL-EG).

When the researcher told the students that the headline "The trip ended shortly after the border", used as motto for some zines, referred to criminals being stopped, there was a discussion about crime and the effectiveness of borders and border control to stop crime. The zines based on this headline were associated with border control stopping people from perceived (or real) transgression of the border. The students did not know that the headline referred to a police record but associated the narrative with more regular stoppings and selective inspections fitting racial profiling.

> *Then we travelled from Denmark to Germany, and at the German border, I think it was a black family who were rudely pulled out of the bus, just this one family.* (DKDE_4)

Our informants did not perceive the border as a place of transgression, but rather as a place perceived by state authorities to be a place of transgression:

> *When they said I should drive back home, I had to drive back home – it's not at the border you can solve a problem, you must look where the problem comes from*. (DEDK_3)

Border security and border identity

One of the headlines used for the zines was "The Minorities were left out", referring to the headline of an article in the German minority's daily newspaper Der Nordschleswiger, 23 May 2020 ("*die Minderheiten wurden im Stich gelassen"*), in which a Danish majority politician criticized the Danish government for not having taken the situation of the borderland minorities into consideration when closing the border. In these zines, the young participants explored the specific perceptions of minorities regarding border closures. One zine reflected young people's dreams of the freedom provided by open borders, now destroyed by the border closures of the pandemic. A (fictional) diary reflected on the isolation and loneliness at home many teenagers experienced in March 2020. Participant narratives reflected not being able to visit family members living in the neighboring country because of travel restrictions. All informants mentioned the impact of the pandemic-induced border closures on their daily cross-border living practices.

Zine Image 3: This story of a border crossing reflects insecurity: "we are allowed to drive on. But you don't really feel like it anymore. One feels foreign in a part of one's home (*Heimat*), which one can only enter with an uneasy feeling".

Borders and minority identity

The impact of the border on shaping minority identity was very present in the interviews, while not directly present in the zines. "No minority without the border", was a frequent statement, reflecting the historic reality of the constitution of the two reciprocal minorities after the border delineation in 1920, as well as

the strong role of minority-kinstate relations in the region. One interviewed went so far as to define herself differently when crossing the border:

> *It's also because my life in the different countries isn't the same. I have two different lives, and I know that. When I cross the border, I'm a different person because I'm surrounded by different people and, well, I go to different places.* (DEDK_2)

All four of the interviewed Danish minority youth reflected on their specific minority identity shaped by their socio-cultural living practices within the triangle minority-kinstate-home state nexus (Brubaker, 2010). Danish minority youth mentioned their special experience of cultural immersion with the kinstate when moving to Denmark for secondary- or higher education as a "wow" effect of experiencing difference, a perception of a cultural border not only between Denmark and Germany, but also between the Danish minority and its kinstate. This may result in an in-between perception, which is shared by youth from the German minority.

> *I also have to say […] that the same border, because I come from the Danish minority, is perhaps something like a soft border.* (DEDK_4)

This in-between or "both-and" perception is not perceived as a barrier or disadvantage, but as a resource and opportunity. It is an experience common to both minorities, but none of the informants perceived it as a basis for a joint Danish-German minority identity.

Narratives on Europe

The interviews asked specifically about the EU and its role for the border region and national minorities, and the zine-making workshop included a specific discussion round on the EU. All participants reflected an awareness and sense of gratitude for being European. Both the German minority and Danish minority participants were aware of the Schengen agreement of open borders and the EU's role in securing the openness of borders, as well as other privileges of being EU citizens (travel, work).

Europe as opportunity

All participants supported an open Europe narrative and the opportunities it gave them, such as the Erasmus study exchange program or the possibility to live and work in the kinstate.

> *Yes, I think that what a person experiences here in Europe with a border and what a person can experience in Europe at a border is very different from other countries and other continents, because we have the European Union and therefore things like the Schengen Agreement.* (DEDK_3)

The informants from the Danish minority all had experiences of border crossing for education and/or work, and frequent border crossing is part of their daily life, due to their border region minority identity and socialization. This has not been the case with the informants from the German minority, very probably because they were still in high school. The informants expressed a perception of cross-border regional life. Only a few identified barriers concerning taxation and/or recognition of education. Most informants expressed a perception of a backlash on border openness, fearing restrictions to the freedom of movement, a return to more nationalism and more border control. There was no difference between the members of either minority.

One member of the German minority stressed the opportunity of being able to cross-border commute to high school – which, in fact, is not a general opportunity but restricted to residents of Germany. Some interviewees from the Danish minority tied the perceived best practice of minority-majority accommodation and relations in the region to Europe; Europe being an actor making border-regional diversity possible (in fact, it is a bilateral Danish-German arrangement which has preceded European integration).

Europe as a protector of minorities

> *"If Europe becomes more unified, the minorities will be overshadowed and not get as much attention because everything can then be presented in such a simple and straightforward way."* (DEDK_1)

The quote above is the only quote directly expressing fear that too much European integration could harm small minority communities because of assimilation threats. Most other informants perceived the EU to have a positive role in supporting diversity and protecting minorities. Quite a few informants tied the EU to the relaxed minority-majority setting of the region, as well as to the opportunity to attend minority schools. The students were aware of the more difficult situation of other minorities living in the EU (though none was mentioned specifically). One informer from the Danish minority was also aware of the failure of the Minority Safe Pack Initiative, nevertheless she appropriated the EU a special role for minorities and mentioned the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (passed by the Council of Europe). This reveals a positive perception of the EU as norm-setter for the treatment of national minorities, when in effect the norms have been set by the Council of Europe in general, and for the Danish-German border region by the two national governments, in fact decades before the mentioned Council of Europe frameworks.

Europe in the background

Europe or the EU were not key themes in the interviews or zines, unless asked for specifically. This indicates the "it's just there" perception or what we have identified as banal Europeanism. Freedom of movement and open borders are taken for granted in principle.

> *"Okay, it's Europe and I can travel through the countries and stuff, but it's not something I think about that much."* (DEDK_6)

Disruption of this freedom through border controls was considered as an annoyance by one student specifically.

Narratives of open/closed Europe

Europe was reflected on in the zines referring to the German minority's chairman's quote of European failure, when Denmark reintroduced border controls in January 2016 to mitigate the perceived threat of migration. In effect, though, neither of the two zines with these headlines made specific reference to the EU as a decisive actor with the power to close or open borders.

Open borders vs. closed borders (borders as bridges or barriers) were a clear focus, where the EU was identified with open borders, or, reciprocally, open borders were identified with the EU. The students agreed that life in internal EU/Schengen borderlands was very different from life in other borderlands. But they also mentioned the challenges of re-bordering and border controls on this perception of open borders and

an EU where citizens enjoy equal rights and freedom of movement. There was a perception of politicians reverting to nationalism as the main cause of border securitization: people fearing open borders and border controls resulting in a perception of more security. Border controls could create a border in the minds, a perception that something bad or criminal comes from the other side, which you do not want to have in your country and thus building up stereotypes about people from the other side.

Zine Image 4: Direct criticism of the EU not interfering with the national governments' extension of border controls.

Nevertheless, EU borders were perceived as peaceful borders, despite border controls at internal EU borders.

EU: United in diversity?

Another theme touched on in the workshop discussion and the interviews was about a united or divided Europe/EU. Here, the students reflected on the perceived contradiction of the EU's cultural diversity with a strong focus on perceived national cultures. This cultural diversity was seen as an immaterial wealth to be preserved, perhaps contradicting the aims of European integration, acknowledging the perceived difficulty of having all these cultures to function together. A student (f) commented, though, that most cultures in Europe probably were very similar, but perceived as different because of a focus on differences or lack of knowledge about the other. One student (m) remarked on a cleavage between the perceived more similar cultures of the founding EC members on the one side and the post-socialist countries' culture on the other – with the similarity of each block creating an antagonism making European integration more difficult.

EU and identity

When asked directly, European identity did play a role for all informers, but not necessarily straightforward, and not tied to specific characteristics. It was a vague, "it's just there" form of acknowledgment of being European, an awareness of the advantages of being from a European country.

> *I don't really know how to describe my feelings about Europe, because I feel quite secure in Europe, I must say. I'm quite happy that I come from a European country. But I also see a lot of things that are very complicated. Especially when you think about the different institutions we have.* (DEDK_5)

Here, security, the welfare state, good educational opportunities, and easy travel around the EU were mentioned. No informer named directly the disadvantages of being an EU citizen.

Comparison with media analysis

The media analysis conducted in the Danish-German borderland region (Engl et al., 2024), extrapolated around the "Border as a bridge" and "Border as a fence" narrative, with almost one article coded per day referring to "border as a bridge". This reflects the periods of crisis (migration, COVID-19) that were analyzed. While giving room for other opinions in quotes of politicians etc., editorials of the newspapers *Flensborg Avis* and *Der Nordschleswiger*, as well as quotes of minority politicians, were biased towards open borders, criticizing re-bordering and the introduction of border controls as detrimental to the border region's development, as a step back, and as harming the minorities more severely than others. As a surprising result, the "border as a place of transgression" was coded rather frequently, appearing in about 40% of the newspaper editions selected for the analysis. The articles studied usually referred to police reports about petty criminal activities stopped at the border. This narrative did not feature in the interviews and zines. It was also apparent that voices of young people were underrepresented in the media analysis, as well as a very male bias (about ¾ of the quotes were from male actors). Furthermore, a key narrative presented in the media analysis was the perception of being left out – decisions (on border controls) were made without consulting the minorities, and without consideration of the special impact they had on their cross-border lives.

Our interviews and zines were intended to present bottom-up perceptions of young minority members. As the border was open in principle and only controlled randomly at the time of the data collection (spring 2024–spring 2025), these perceptions were not so directly impacted by the border crises of 2015–16 and 2020, and thus differed from the media narratives. The situation at the border was perceived as peaceful and the border as open, and the informants did not experience difficulties crossing in person – only stories about others who encountered difficulties because of racial profiling or not being EU-citizens. There was, however, a perception of the open border as being threatened: the pandemic has demonstrated that borders can be physically closed in an instant. The students are also aware of populist demands for more control or closed borders, as well as a threat to the EU as they perceive it today (with open borders and the freedom to work and live in any EU country).

Altogether, the material collected demonstrates a very balanced perception of European societies and border region life by the young minority members, combined with a consciousness that the border shapes perceptions and impacts their daily lives and their identity as borderland residents belonging to a national minority with the kinstate across the border. The young minority members expressed a clear desire for open borders in the region and within the EU, while threats were identified that could justify control and more closed borders elsewhere. Specifically, southern Europe and the US-Mexican border were named here. This applies for informants from both minorities, with the slight difference that the interviewees from the Danish minority in Germany had already graduated from high school, and all of them had gained border-crossing life experience by studying and/or working in Denmark.

5.4 Slovak-Hungarian Borderland

Author: Péter Balogh

This section focuses on the zine workshop and the individual interviews carried out in southern Slovakia. The zine workshop was held on November 11, 2024, at the J. Selye University (JSU) in Komárno, a border city of 32,000 in southwestern Slovakia. The workshop was held in Hungarian. The participants were all students of History at the Faculty of Education of JSU. All of them originated from southern Slovakia, including many from south-central and southeastern Slovakia which are more peripheral regions. All participants identified themselves as ethnic Hungarians from Slovakia. It is important to note that JSU is the only Hungarian-language university in the country and that it is relatively small. Hence, most ethnic Hungarian students from Slovakia are studying at other higher-ed institutions in Slovakia, Hungary, Czechia, or elsewhere. Accordingly, the ethnic-minority identity of young people choosing JSU is probably more accentuated than elsewhere.

The individual interviews were conducted between November 26 and December 11, 2024, in Štúrovo and Budapest. The former is a border-town in south-central Slovakia with 10,000 residents, of which 64% identified as ethnic Hungarians in the 2021 census. In total, seven interviews were carried out by Péter Balogh with 4 women and 3 men aged between 19–31. All interviews took place in Hungarian. Most, if not all, have either already completed some form of tertiary education or were about to do so or were just embarking on it. One interviewee was a member of the local municipal council as an independent representative. Yet another one worked at municipal cultural organisations, with the remaining ones being students. It should be noted that the area around Štúrovo and Esztergom is a particularly deeply integrated region along the Slovakia-Hungary border (Balogh & Pete, 2018). The Mária Valéria Bridge has been reopened in 2001, and since 2016 from Esztergom one can reach Budapest by train in an hour. This may partly explain that the interviewees were all highly mobile individuals, frequently crossing the border. Three of them were currently studying in Budapest (at different universities), each with a different pattern of commuting back to southern Slovakia: one on a weekly basis, one monthly (this person originates from Nitra, i.e. further inside Slovakia), and one still residing in Štúrovo but commuting for her classes to Budapest. The remaining four were living in Štúrovo or its immediate surroundings but also very often crossing to neighbouring Esztergom or elsewhere in Hungary.

Narratives on the border

The Invisible Border

If we understand the Slovak-Hungarian border in a narrow, geographical sense, the participants devoted a varying amount of attention to it. The border was most frequently described as a 'bridge' in a physical and figurative sense, as the following quote illustrates:

> *'Beyond its mere presence on the map, I think that from the perspective of the people it just means receiving a text message on our phones saying: 'Welcome to Hungary', or vice versa. … Crossing is quite free since the Covid restrictions have been lifted. The big difference is that over here you pay in Euros, and over there in Forints. Additionally, tobacco is cheaper here. And I think that's basically it.*' (SKHU_Zine workshop_1)

Or, as another one put it: 'When crossing the border, it's as if it didn't exist. The border is there, but it isn't. It exists geographically, but one can no longer perceive it' (Interviewee 1). Similarly, according to another informant: 'For us – I mean, for the young generation – there is nothing special about crossing back and forth. I don't even think about there being a border upon crossing it – apart from COVID' (Interviewee 2). Indeed, none thought that the border was a barrier – except during COVID, as one of them aptly put it:

> *'Then I felt that this border is no good and that I'm in a wrong place… People normally live their lives on both sides here, so back then I felt as if I had been told not to walk from one room of my apartment to another. ... During Covid, it has been terrible to be faced with the border again and then one thought about how great the Schengen Area is.'* (SKHU_Zine workshop_1)

Yet, simultaneously and crucially, there was a recurring attitude that the border should not disappear, which underlines its importance for the regional ethnic identity: 'Without borders, we're losing our identity. But that doesn't preclude having open borders and being open toward each other, I believe' (MR3). Accordingly, for other participants, to the extent that the border still mattered as a barrier, these were desired to be overcome (see Image 1).

Image 1: On the left and middle pages (by Zine workshop participant 1): 'Down with our borders, down with our barriers, and down with our differences, so that we won't be antagonistic neighbours!' The page to the right was compiled by Zine workshop participant 2, where the text reads: 'Love knows no borders'

Hence, another participant identified with the border(land) rather than either side of it: 'This is my home, I grew up along the border. The border is not negative but rather positive, because to me it means good things – irrespectively of the fact that a border per se isn't necessarily something good' (SKHU_1). Essentially, all informants were at ease with the border – as long as it remained open.

Accordingly, when the discussion revolved around the borderland (more broadly understood) or the border in a cultural sense, it became clear that these make up central elements of the participants' lives. Some chose to reflect on these aspects from a macro-scale perspective, focusing on political, territorial, historical, or symbolic features. But many adopted a micro-scale approach, stressing personal experiences, stories and emotions (see Image 2).

Image 2: On the left zine page, the participant chose to map the route that she often took between southern Slovakia and northern Hungary. The use of different colours for one side and the other may be noteworthy, but even more so the centrality of the borderland in her life. On the right, the same participant added a photo of a crossing point that resembles the one she most often crossed.

Borders and minority identity

Most interviewees highlighted their regional-minority identity and identified as 'Felvidék Hungarian' - a term many perceived as distinct from 'Slovakia Hungarian'. Felvidék is a Hungarian term literally meaning Upland and denoting the northern regions of historical Hungary that nowadays largely constitute Slovakia. The use of Felvidék Hungarian by the interviewees was not coupled with any irredentist illusions, while one respondent (Interviewee 3) explained that persons with a stronger ethno-national identity typically choose the term while those with looser ties to the Hungarian nation would opt for Slovakia Hungarian. In the words of another informant:

> *There's a lot of debate among Slovakia Hungarians whether 'Slovakia Hungarian' or 'Felvidék Hungarian' is the proper label. I like using both, I don't have an issue with either of them. There are people in Štúrovo as well who get stressed about this, refusing to be identified as 'Slovakia Hungarians', which I perceive as a bit exaggerated. I'm not consciously using one or the other, but whichever comes first. Actually, I might be saying 'Slovakia Hungarian' more often and think that's also increasingly the case in media.* (SKHU_2)

Several interviewees also self-identified as European, but only as a secondary identity. None could relate to the label 'szlovmagy', used by some journalists to refer to a hybrid identity. The rejection of (or unfamiliarity with) that label does not mean that the informants did not share any self-identification narratives that resemble the sort of hybrid features often encountered in border situations. But it seems that people are more comfortable with indicating one or another identity label even in multicultural contexts, or at least to rank one above another (to maintain the illusion of a stable self).

At the same time, several respondents highlighted the cross-border nature of their community: 'Esztergom is my home just like Štúrovo […]. It is one community, with people crossing from both sides' (SKHU_4). Another one said that 'as I'm speaking Hungarian on both sides, they somehow fuse' (SKHU_5). The quality and depth of interconnectedness across the border goes far beyond shopping and tourism, exemplified by intimate cross-border relationships that at least two of the participants also reported having developed.

Being member of an ethnic minority was associated with advantages and disadvantages alike. Several mentioned the knowledge of both (or more) languages, which can even be a formal requirement at some workplaces in Štúrovo (SKHU_6). But beyond that, as another interviewee put it: 'Being part of a minority provides more viewpoints, not just those of the majorities' (SKHU_3). Yet another one elaborated on this thus:

> *Within my generation, everyone knows everyone… This system of relations is smaller – it's like an umbrella… So, being part of a minority comes with a certain sense of cohesion. I've got many friends between Dunajská Streda and Štúrovo. There is a youth association with many divisions – including Bratislava, Nitra, and Košice – to which only us Felvidék Hungarians belong. This has created a network of relationships whereby upon visiting any of these cities one can meet someone one already knows, can speak Hungarian with, and is similarly aged. So, this means belonging together. It also fills me with pride, because I don't feel as less of a person for being a Slovakia or Felvidék Hungarian. I also know Slovak – not like a native speaker, but it is part of my toolkit.* (SKHU_7)

Some pointed out the disadvantages and prejudices that may come with belonging to a minority. The fact that the zine-makers were students of history may to a certain degree explain that some of them also reflected on certain historical collective traumas as well as recent grievances experienced by Slovakia Hungarians (see Image 3).

Image 3: This zine page commemorates historical grievances. Top left is a news headline: 'Trianon, the cornerstone of Slovak statehood'. To the left: 'collectivisation, resettlement and deportation, re-Slovakisation, language laws'. Top right is a photo of a sticker claiming that one should speak Slovak in Slovakia. Right bottom: an infamous quote by Ján Slota from the 2000s: 'Hungarians are a tumour on the body of the Slovak nation that needs to be immediately removed' (cf. Nedelsky 2016: 988).

But most accounts reflected on recent, personal experiences: 'In some shops, some wouldn't reply to me in Hungarian even though they very probably could. Jobwise, I'm a bit disadvantaged as my Slovak isn't on the level of a native speaker. And in Hungary, it's more difficult to find a job as I'm a Slovak citizen' (SKHU_7). Instances of being questioned ('Why are you here?' or 'You are not a normal Hungarian') apparently occur on both sides and understandably make the affected persons feel uncomfortable. At least a few participants reported a sense of feeling lost in their identity negotiations due to not being fully accepted in either Slovakia or Hungary.

Additionally, several interviewees reported having to explain their background – especially when in other countries. Whether this necessity was perceived negatively depended on the individual and the context, including the location:

> *Within Slovakia, being member of a minority is a disadvantage – I often feel disadvantaged. But in other European countries, it is neutral: people don't even understand what being Slovakia Hungarian means – which I think is sad. Not even in Hungary: people there didn't understand either what I'm doing here. Someone even asked me why I'm not moving home – but I am at home. It is tiring to explain all this in Europe, and it is even angering in Hungary.* (SKHU_1)

Another respondent was however more relaxed about this:

> *People totally don't understand how it is possible that Hungarians are living in Slovakia. But then we explain – for instance, to partners in European projects – and then they understand. [...] This is not unpleasant; I just explain to them and am happy that they are open to understanding it.* (SKHU_7)

Finally, yet another informant reported to even enjoy such situations:

> *I've been to a couple of places in the world and when I say I'm from Slovakia I always add that I normally speak Hungarian, as that is my native tongue. And, of course, no one – including a Ukrainian – has understood what I'm talking about. [...] This [explaining] is a bit tiring, though I kind of like it. [...] And I'm happy to speak about these issues.* (SKHU_2)

While members of ethnic minorities being othered in their countries of residence is not uncommon anywhere, the othering in their kinstate Hungary is more surprising, particularly given the emphasis on transborder national unity stressed by Hungary's longstanding government. Accordingly, othering can take place both within and between the ethno-linguistic communities and underlie feelings of being lost (Image 4).

Image 4: These zine-cover pages capture the senses of being lost and not belonging (but still being) here, respectively. The left one reads: 'Life in Slovakia as a Hungarian'. The right one is just titled 'Felvidék', a historical but still used label for what is today Slovakia.

Moreover, there is a perception in southern Slovakia that it is deliberately underinvested into due to the region having high concentrations of ethnic Hungarians. This perception has been present for decades (Balogh & Pete 2018) but apparently still exists:

> *This borderland always gets less money from the Slovak state, so the locals need to be self-reliant – they always need to search for opportunities to make money and to work twice as much. So, these local villages and towns need to stand on their own feet. As far as I know, there is less money coming here because this is a Hungarian-inhabited region. And this goes irrespective of any incumbent government. Locals are concerned about this.* (SKHU_4)

In contrast, several participants emphasised the usefulness of kinstate Hungary's financial aid to transborder Hungarian students. This support is designed to secure the recipients' ethno-linguistic identity and improve their livelihood. In general, though, at least two interviewees (SKHU_1 and SKHU_2) have emphasised that Slovak-Hungarian relations have improved over the past years locally as well as more generally.

Narratives on Europe

Regarding the EU and Europe, different viewpoints were shared even by the same participants. These included positive as well as negative perceptions, but no one expressed any desire for either Slovakia or Hungary to exit the EU just as no one was an explicit Europhile. Open internal open borders and concomitant opportunities were seen as the main plus, while a perceived interference into certain domestic issues (like migration policy) as the main minus.

Europe as a space for opportunities

Overall, the participants were expressing different attitudes toward Europe and especially the European Union (EU). The only thing they all shared was the high level of appreciation of the open intra-Schengen borders, which was even seen as the single most important benefit of EU membership generally. Other

advantages identified included various EU programs such as Erasmus, the youth voluntary service program, opportunities related to employment and various youth camps, as well as feelings of security. One interviewee said: 'I believe there are many advantages for young people. For instance, Interrail… I'm travelling around a lot and it's great that there are no border controls.' (SKHU_5)

Some of the Eurosceptic voices were formulated in a strongly emotional and even vulgar manner. One research participant believed that the EU was 'ramming stupid ideologies' and 'spreading nonsensical bullshit'. Others criticised its governance and priorities, where too much focus and resources were invested into the wrong issues. One contributor opined that 'they are trying to interfere in domestic politics way too much, which is not good' (SKHU_Zine_workshop_3). Another participant claimed that 'it is an economic alliance that is basically trying to make its own countries bankrupt through its dumb economic decisions' (SKHU_Zine_workshop_4).

EU and the lack of minority protection

The aspect pertaining most to WP4 is that several respondents lamented the EU's lack of action in the field of (autochthonous) ethnic minority protection, as the following two quotes reflect.

> *I'm rather against the EU as while it holds human rights important, it isn't really concerned with the rights of minority Hungarians [...]. The EU should play a bigger role in embracing minority rights. If everyone is equal then members of minorities should be equal, too. It's not just the Hungarians – there are numerous other minorities in Europe, and I feel the EU isn't doing much for them either. The opposite is being communicated externally but not perceived locally.* (SKHU_1)

Europe and Security

While all research participants appreciated the openness of internal borders, as was shown above, their majority considered the protection of external borders important (Image 5). As one informant put it: 'Borderless Europe is good within, but Fortress Europe would be good toward the outside' (SKHU_1). Another one had a different opinion: 'I think there is some truth in both notions. Recently, Fortress Europe has received more emphasis, unfortunately. I also think the reading of someone living in Europe will be different from that of someone living on another continent.' (SKHU_2)

When debating the pros and cons of EU membership, one participant thought that 'small states such as Slovakia need military protection […] and can feel being part of a larger entity and thus stronger' (SKHU_Zine_workshop_5). When the discussion revolved around the EU's external borders, one participant believed that the current level of openness and protection is 'well-optimised' (SKHU_Zine_workshop_1). He recalled travelling to Egypt and having to pass all kinds of checks but assessed that these were justified. Another participant had much more radical views:

> *The EU's external borders are a disaster! All Frontex staff should be fired and the competences handed over to the nation-states. There should be fire command at the border to stop people from even attempting to cross illegally. There is no other way to protect the border. Just as Russia or the US have fire command at their borders*.' (SKHU_Zine_workshop_4).

Image 5: The left zine page acknowledges the freedom of mobility within the EU. The right one shows a historical map of a fort in Komárno, with the label 'Fortress Europe' added right below. Then the quote: 'If we don't win, the Carpathian Basin will be a country of immigrants!'

Comparison of workshop and interview analysis with media analysis

The three different points of analyses all pointed to a plurality of views within Slovakia's ethnic Hungarian community. In the media analysis (of hundreds of articles), a conscious choice was made to pick two different news portals with diverging political leanings; ujszo.com and felvidek.ma, which are also the two largest ones. But even within those two media, different opinions were present.

Concerning the first, much smaller sample, the participants of the zine workshop (especially the more vocal ones) were a bit more ethno-nationalistically tuned. This can be explained by the fact that they have chosen to study history at the Pedagogical Faculty of Slovakia's small and only Hungarian-language higher-education institution. The J. Selye University is located in Komárno in southwestern Slovakia, yet the majority of the participants have moved there from the south-central and southeastern parts of the country – often hundreds of kilometres away. These young people could have chosen to study at universities in Hungary that are geographically closer to their native regions. But their choice to go for a history program in more distant Komárno can be interpreted as reflecting an ambition to stay in Slovakia and probably become a teacher in Hungarian-language schools in their native communities. Although we did not ask about their future migration plans, when this topic popped up only one expressed a desire to potentially move to Hungary in the future. Regarding EUrope, different viewpoints were shared even by the same participants. These included positive and negative perceptions, but no one expressed any desire for either Slovakia or Hungary to exit the EU just as no one could be deemed an explicit Europhile. Open internal open borders and concomitant opportunities were seen as the main plus, while a perceived interference into certain domestic issues (like migration policy) as the main minus.

The other minor sample was even smaller, but the nature of data collection – interviewing – has allowed for deeper engagement with different individuals. With one exception, the informants in this case were living in the border city of Štúrovo (two now in Budapest but even they regularly commute home). They generally seemed happy with their lives as well as their community, which was now often understood to incorporate the neighbouring Hungarian city of Esztergom as well. Hence, they were all crossing the border

on a regular basis – and not just for short visits (like shopping or eating out) but also for activities that imply greater commitment, like studying or engaging in extracurricular activities. Questions around self-identification were even more explicit than in the zine workshop, and it became clear that the interviewees primarily identified as Hungarians from Slovakia or Felvidék (the two labels refer to the same territory, but their respective use was explained by the respondents and thus also in the interview analysis).

As explained in the interview analysis, there was just one identity label taken from the media analysis that they found peculiar and could not relate to: 'szlovmagy' – a label some journalists may have used to refer to a hybrid identity. The rejection of (or unfamiliarity with) that label does not mean that the informants have not shared any self-identification narratives that resemble the sort of hybrid features often encountered in border situations. But it seems that people are more comfortable with indicating one or another identity label even in multicultural contexts, or at least to rank one above another – perhaps to maintain the illusion of a stable self. That again does not imply that the interviewees have not self-identified as Europeans (which several of them explicitly have), but that comes secondary and is of course also another scale of socio-spatial identification. Regarding EUrope, their perceptions were mixed but were overall more positive than among the zine participants. Still, several of the interviewees have lamented the EU's lack of agency concerning autochthonous ethnic minority rights.

5.5 Greek-Bulgarian-Turkish borderland

Authors: Martin Klatt, Nazrin Gadimova-Akbulut, Petranka Nedelcheva

B-SHAPES arranged a combined zine-making and interview workshop on 12 October 2024 in Xanthi, Greece, facilitated by the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), an NGO representing different Turkish minority organizations and institutions in north-eastern Greece. The workshop was attended by 25 young (18-30) members of the Turkish minority, 11 male and 14 female. Petranka Nedelcheva explained the procedure in Greek, assisted by facilitators from ABTTF explaining it in Turkish. After the zine-making, nine participants were interviewed in Turkish by other participants, using the standard interview guide, which had been machine-translated into Turkish and edited by a facilitator from ABTTF.

All workshop participants stressed the importance of their Turkish identity and the difficult situation of the minority, which is characterized by non-recognition and discrimination. They emphasized an in-between situation within the triad of Europe/the EU, the Greek state and their Greek citizenship, and the Turkish kinstate and their Turkish identity. Their religious identity as Muslims in a predominantly Christian Greek-Orthodox country did not play an important role in the narratives – with only a few comments to the conflict of who may appoint imams of Muslim communities: in most cities, there is a mosque led by an imam appointed by the Greek state in competition to a mosque led by an imam chosen by the community. In that sense, respondents reported that while the Greek government does not recognize the ethnic identity of Turks in the region, it also restricts their religious rights even though they are protected by the Treaty of Lausanne.

Narratives on the border

The participants perceived borders as being constructed by nation states, not by communities. Borders were seen to enforce sovereignty, security, and economic control, but also segregate people who share language, culture and identity. This is evidenced in the following quote:

> *We are Turks, but we live in Greece and there is a border with Türkiye that separates us* (GKBUTK_1)

All informants frequently crossed the Turkish-Greek border for education, work, family visits, and other leisure activities. The border crossing experience is described as cautious, reflecting the community's vulnerability, and fear. The border is perceived as very visible to the Turkish-Greek minority workshop participants and interviewees. In contrast to the other case studies, there were no narratives about the *invisible border*.

Border as a fence/barrier

The Greek-Turkish border is an external EU border and has at times been a hot-spot of irregular migration. It is both heavily fenced and militarized. As EU citizens, no visa restrictions apply for members of the Turkish minority in Greece when entering Türkiye, but relatives and friends from the kin state usually need a visa to enter Greece. Participants of the workshop and in the interviews shared personal accounts of racial profiling, intimidation, and psychological pressure applied by Greek border police when crossing the border:

> *You get scared when you're about to cross the border – when the border security sees our names, some of them are racists … some act as if we have committed crimes.* (GKBUTK_2)

Crossing the border is not just perceived as a bureaucratic act, it is a moment of fear and self-censorship, shaped by historical trauma and current policies. The symbolic power of the border is not only about territory, but about who is seen as a threat. The act of crossing is not neutral, it is politicized. This is evidenced in the following quote:

> *Strict controls, fear of being stopped, or being treated as suspicious – it makes you feel like a criminal for simply crossing.* (GKBUTK_3)

The politicization of borders was linked to broader reflections on passports, ID cards, and the invisible walls that structure daily life for non-recognized, not acknowledged minorities like the Turkish one in Greece. That said, many participants accepted the principle of sovereignty: that countries control or even close borders to guard against migrants and the influx of illegal contrabands as drugs or weapons. Nevertheless, the young adults' narratives emphasized the impact of border closures on the people residing in the border region (who cannot cross and visit) as well as on trade. They highlightedthat fences and other obstacles placed in front of people to prevent them from freedom of expression, communication and socialization. Fences were also seen to symbolize a lack of communication, and the increased security checks on the Turkish-Greek border that have left the minority in a dead end situation.

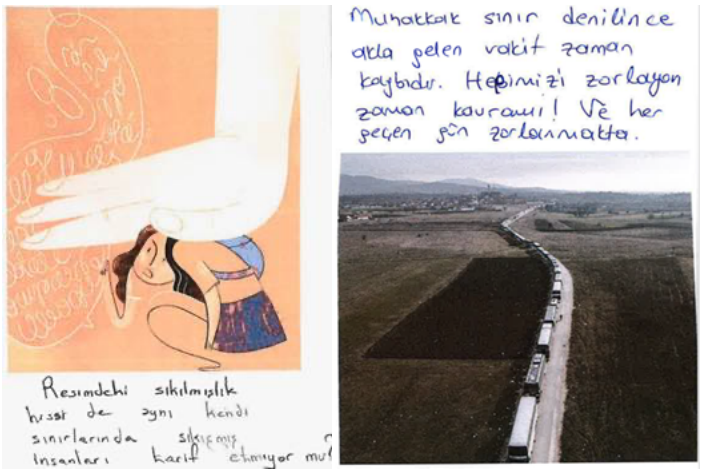

Image 1: The zine page on the left describes the feelings of being limited within borders. The caption under the picture says: “Doesn't the feeling of boredom in the picture describe people stuck within their own boundaries?” (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_3). The zine page on the right explains the loss of time bringing another dimension of border as a barrier: “When it comes to borders, the first thing that comes to mind is losing time. The concept of time challenges us all! And it gets harder every day.” (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_11).

Border as a site of opportunity

The participants made only a few direct references to the border as a site of opportunity. Several participants emphasized the economic significance of crossing points, with shopping trips across the Bulgarian border becoming part of everyday life. Others stressed how economic changes have made crossings easier “comparing to the old times”.

Beyond economics, the border was also imagined as a bond that connects different sides. The Evros river bridge was described as a symbol of cultural transfer, where people, ideas, and traditions flow across. Some of the participants referred to the Turkish minority of Western Thrace as a potential bridge of friendship between Türkiye and Greece (GKBUTK_1). Finally, despite the physical and political borders, the shared Turkish language across the region functions as a powerful connector, which was seen as softening the harshness of borders. While here it implies minority-kin state relations, this focus on language as a tool to bridge borders could inspire other border settings as well.

Image 2: "There are no boundaries actually. The boundary is just our creation" (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_14).

Border as an element of security

Borders were also understood as protective tools that safeguard society from external threats. As some participants mentioned, borders play an essential role in sustaining cultural uniqueness in the face of European integration. One interviewee argued that:

> *Having borders is very important to preserve culture. Because cultures become homogenized, the things that distinguish countries from each other disappear and nothing will be different, special, beautiful (*GKBUTK_4).

Others stressed the importance of borders in maintaining order and security. Border controls and technologies such as X-rays were seen as necessary ("Border control should be done more often, there are many times things and people that cross the border which should not cross it", GKBUTK_2). In this perspective, borders are not only symbolic lines but also mechanisms of regulation: *"*Borders exist to separate two nations, to prevent a messy, chaotic situation" (GKBUTK_2). Finally, borders were seen as a protection device preventing the onset of new conflicts and wars, but also the place of a potential clash between the two sides, the place where new conflicts might emerge.

On the other hand, respondents warned against reducing borders to mere fences or obstacles. Instead, they suggested that borders can also serve as opportunities for cooperation and mutual recognition: *"*Politics means not a fence, but solidarity (of reaching hand in hand)*"* (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_2).

Border and minority identity

For members of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace, the border is inseparable from questions of belonging and identity. It was a central focus of participants' narratives, and border experiences were described as decisive for their perception of minority identity. This applies to the physical border between Greece and Türkiye, which is experienced differently than the internal EU Greek-Bulgarian border, but it also applies to experiences of societal bordering within the region (minority/majority). Minority identity is clearly shaped by the border triad of Turkish-Greek, minority-suppressive majority, and Greece-Rest of the EU/The "true" Europe. This is highlighted in the following quote:

> *The border shows that even though I am a Turkish minority, I live in Greece and not in Türkiye. And this way I understand that I am a minority because I am a Turk* (GKBUTK_4)

This perspective reflects the layered identities many participants expressed, defining themselves simultaneously as Turks, members of the Turkish minority, Thracians, European citizens, and Greek citizens. Others, however, emphasized the exclusivity of Turkishness, rooted in language, religion, and heritage: "Because my mother tongue is Turkish, my homeland is Türkiye. I have never felt myself as a Greek and I have never had this nature" (GKBUTK_4).

Experiences of discrimination and repression shaped these narratives. Participants spoke of assimilation pressures, unequal schooling conditions, bans on associations using the word "Turkish," and exclusionary treatment at border checkpoints. One of the interviewees referred to the perceptions of modernity vs. ignorance dominant in Greek society about the usage of Turkish language:

> *If you are in Western Thrace, you can speak any language you want, except Turkish. If you spoke Greek, you were considered a modernist, educated. If you spoke Turkish, you were a reactionary, a bigot, an ignorant* (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_10).

Also, the sense of being treated as a threat was mentioned in the answers of several interviewees. One of the respondents referred to the policy of de-minoritization implemented by the Greek government:

> *This policy forces Turks to migrate in Western Thrace through methods such as economic sanctions, heavy taxes and restrictions on job opportunities. The goal is to remove the Turks from Western Thrace, a border region, and to fully mobilize the region* (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_15).

At the same time, for some, bilingualism and belonging to several cultures were described as privileges, offering the ability to navigate across national and cultural landscapes. Most importantly, minority identity was framed as a source of resilience:"If we are not courageous, if we do not take risks and if we do not uphold unity as a minority, then and only then, we will disappear" (GKBUTK_Zine_workshop_2).

Image 3: The left zine page presents the question of belonging in the symbolic pictures of Greek and Turkish flags standing side by side. The caption under the picture says: "Two countries, two homelands. What is homeland?" (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_6). The right zine page shows a lonely soldier on the battlefield with a caption: "Being a minority is like loneliness. A minority individual deprived of minority rights in their homeland and feeling homesick for their motherland" (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_ 9).

Narratives on Europe

There is a clear perception of Europe's borders, where Türkiye is perceived to be outside, but also their home state Greece not really perceived as European because of its restrictive minority policies. The EU to the north of Greece, on the other hand, is perceived as *real Europe*, with a lot of hopes that it will put pressure on Greece to stop discriminatory practices, or as a space to migrate to if Greek policies become too suppressive. Greece, in contrast, was not perceived as a true European country, while Türkiye was perceived to be outside Europe, too, despite being a candidate country of the EU. Some participants have sharply challenged the perception of Europe as a space of openness and civil rights referring to Europe as an expression of colonialism and the failure to respect human rights. Despite being EU citizens, participants felt excluded from Europe's promises, experiencing the EU as an abstract idea that has failed to protect their rights.

Europe as a place of progress and safety

For many respondents, Europe represents a space of aspiration and advancement. It is described as a "gateway, dreamland, or paradise," though these images are usually associated with Western and Northern Europe rather than Greece. In this framing, Europe is equated with prosperity, stability, and modernity. Technological innovation and rich history are central to this image: "When I think of Europe, I think of technological developments and that Europe has a great history" (GKBUTK_9).

The European Union is also seen as a space of personal safety, a place to turn to in moments of uncertainty ("a place that we can see as an escape point if we get into trouble in Greece, if it gets worse"). Beyond material progress, Europe embodies values of freedom, human development, and integration, offering opportunities for individuals and communities to flourish.

Image 4: Both zine pages describe one message with the pictures of a European airport and a border field: "There is no need for borders within Europe" (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_4/19).

Europe as a distant space

Despite these positive associations, Europe is also depicted as distant, divided, and at times disappointing. Eastern Europe is perceived as "not really Europe," reflecting an imagined hierarchy within the continent. Similarly, Greece is judged to be "European in name only," falling short of the standards of development and minority protection associated with Europe.

This sense of distance extends to the European Union as an institution. Respondents criticize Europe's "introversion", which they believe has historically limited economic, cultural, and social development" (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_5). The EU is also seen as "not doing enough," and in some cases "doing nothing" for the region, failing to exert adequate pressure on Greece or provide meaningful engagement. Such shortcomings are viewed as undermining the EU's credibility as a normative power. In particular, participants expressed hope what Europe could be, a Europe that lives up to its own ideals and protects minorities rather than ignoring them:

> *Communities such as the Turkish minority in Western Thrace are part of Europe's cultural richness and historical diversity. In addition, the Western Thrace minority is an important example to test Europe's commitment to human rights and democratic values* (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_1)

It was mentioned that the real strength of Europe lay in embracing diversity and mutual understanding, bringing different communities together – something which they did not see happen in their home region. The difficult experiences of the Turkish community in Thrace were clearly perceived as contrary to the standards of human rights and minority rights in Europe.

Several respondents called for more active engagement from Europe, with some respondents expressing hope for the EU to support minority rights and reduce border hardships. According to the respondents, the EU should invest in education, and should put more pressure on Greece to improve the situation of minorities:

> *The difficulties experienced by the Turkish minority in Western Thrace are contrary to EU human rights and minority rights standards. It is vital that Europe takes a more active role in this matter to protect the fundamental rights and identity of the minority. True unity is possible if the rights of minorities are protected (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_5).*

In several statements hope was expressed on the future of Greece which might one day become "truly European" by fully accepting and safeguarding minority rights.

Europe as a closed fortress

Finally, Europe is also imagined as a fortress, particularly in relation to migration. The EU's restrictive policies are seen as damaging not only to migrants but to Europe itself. As one participant mentioned:

> *The perceptions and thoughts of the local population, political rhetoric, and economic conditions make the integration of migrant communities difficult. Because of these reasons, migrants' efforts to return or move to other countries are increasing, and as a result, the European Union is experiencing difficulties (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_1).*

Image 5: The zine picture on the left describes the growing security measures in Greece: “As a result of increased security checks at the borders, European countries have entered a position where they are virtually declaring war on the world in terms of tourism, economy and politics (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_12). The zine picture on the right delivers the message of closed borders with the caption: “Why is Europe closing its doors?” (GKBUTK_zine_workshop_17).

At the same time, participants recognized the social and economic challenges that hinder the integration of immigrant communities, including local perceptions and difficult conditions. In this context, intercultural communication and integration were highlighted as essential both for human development and for supporting mutual understanding.

6. Discussion

Authors: Johanna Mitterhofer, Alice Engl, Marcus Nicolson

Having presented the results of the five case studies, we now proceed with a concise summary of the main results of the study and the comparisons that can be drawn between the case-study regions. We also make links between the previously conducted media analysis (Engl et al., 2024) and the investigation of young people's voices presented above.

Narratives of borders compared

A strong attachment to open borders emerges as the dominant theme across all the Schengen-cases; whereas the physically visible Greek-Turkish border with strict controls and discriminative profiling of Turkish minority members by Greek border police is dominant in the border narratives collected there. In the Schengen contexts, research participants consistently framed open borders as a vital condition for their way of life, whether in terms of commuting, studying, or maintaining ties across the state border. This attachment has led to a normalization of border-crossing, where mobility is perceived less as an exceptional privilege and more as an ordinary, taken-for-granted aspect of daily life. In the Greek-Turkish case, on the other hand, border crossings are experienced as difficult, with anxiety and unpredictable; hindering our informants in freely connecting with their kin-state.

Reflecting this attachment, young people's accounts consistently frame borders not simply as lines of separation but as connective spaces, a*s* bridges embedded in everyday life. For many, borders are so normalized that they fade into the background, becoming what van der Velde (2012) and Strüver (2005) described as "boring borders". They are part of the familiar local landscape, crossed routinely for leisure, shopping, education, or work. The ease of movement is taken for granted to such an extent that the act of crossing often carries no special symbolic weight.

Where cross-border mobility is less frequently discussed – such as in South Tyrol – the explanation lies not in political or infrastructural barriers but in the limited economic or social pull of "the other side." Here, European rather than immediate cross-border mobility takes precedence, with young people engaging more readily in travel, study, or work opportunities elsewhere in Europe. This indicates that the meaning and salience of a given border are shaped less by its legal status or even geographical proximity than by the perceived attractiveness and opportunities *across* it.

Despite these variations, young people generally perceive the cross-border space and community "as one," reflecting a sense of integration that extends beyond administrative lines. This was especially evident in discussions of minority identity, where borders were often seen as formative -- both shaped by and shaping strong regional-minority identities.

The Turkish-Greek borderland case presents a different view of borders, where the heavily militarized border was largely seen as provoking fear, exclusion, and suspicion. The border was also described as posing a threat to the social fabric of the local community, which was only able to resist separation through a shared use of language and culture.

Across all cases, borders emerge as powerful generators of identities that resist binary categorizations into national frameworks. In South Tyrol and in the Danish-German borderland, people described their identities as being "in-between", embracing elements of both national cultures while also cultivating a distinct regional sense of self. Even informants from the Turkish minority in Greece narrate this in-between identity: a clear Turkish identity, but different from Türkiye as they are Greek/EU citizens and therefore privileged to migrate to other EU countries. This experience of hybridity transforms the border from a site of exclusion into a resource, allowing individuals to draw on multiple traditions without fully assimilating into either national identity. Similarly, in Zaolzie and Southern Slovakia, borders foster strong forms of local belonging that challenge dominant national categories. Taken together, these cases show that borders generate spaces of identity—hybrid, regional, and cross-cultural—that cannot be reduced to national categories. Instead, borders become anchors for distinct forms of belonging, transforming the "in-betweenness" of borderland life into meaningful identities of their own (Brambilla et al., 2015).

These regional identities were, however, not without friction. Several participants described experiencing "ethnostress" (cf. Antone & Hill, 1992; Merskin, 2010) when having to repeatedly explain their origins to members of the majority population or foreigners. Others recounted episodes of stereotyping or prejudice. Notably, these experiences of "bordering" did not occur at the geopolitical border itself but in everyday interactions within national contexts, showing that borders can be socially and symbolically reproduced far from the territorial line. In South Tyrol, for instance, this symbolic bordering took the form of a "phantom border" (von Löwis, 2015) where language served as the primary marker of difference. Such findings underline that the experience of borders is not reducible to physical crossing points; it is also mediated by cultural, linguistic, and social practices. Experiences of feeling excluded from the national majority population can also be conceptualized as processes of *othering*, where national minorities are made to feel as an *internal other* when socializing with compatriots. In the case of the Greek-Turkish border, the Turkish minority highlighted double othering processes, feeling non-Greek and non-European. This can be thought of as a process of *narrative othering* whereby, as Plummer (2019) has described, people share stories and narratives to which they belong but also create narratives about those who do *not* belong -- the narratives of the Other. For example, the young adult participants we interviewed were often happy to be considered as part of the national identity configuration. Nonetheless, they were also often made to feel different, or other, in their interactions with compatriots in different parts of the country and thereby made to feel as an internal *other.*

The extent to which these experiences influenced their own identity configurations varied across individual participants as well as across the case-study contexts.

When closed borders were discussed by participants, they referred most frequently to the realms of memory and history rather than lived experience. Indeed, memories of closed borders were primarily recounted through family stories, historical images, and key events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic border closures stood out as an exceptional and disruptive practice in the otherwise taken-for-granted openness of borders. Importantly, the migration crisis did not feature prominently in young people's accounts, suggesting either a geographical, temporal, and experiential distance from it or its filtering out as irrelevant to their immediate border reality. Generally, closed borders were far from the young people's lifeworlds.

Comparatively, minority media displayed a more dualistic narrative. While some outlets, especially in the Hungarian-Slovak context, also presented borders as bridges and highlighted transnational lifestyles, the dominant media frame in South Tyrol and the Polish-Czech borderlands emphasized *re-bordering* processes. Here, the closed border was narrated both as a necessary tool for addressing security concerns, but also as a potential threat to the socio-economic and cultural life of the borderland and the minority community, as in the Turkish-Greek borderland. This difference in framing points to a key divergence: young people adopt a less politicized and emotional perspective towards borders than the media. For the participants, borders are primarily functional, pragmatic, and non-contentious. Whereas for the media, they remain sites of political tension and economic vulnerability.

In both the minority media and young adult narratives, however, there is a shared critique that neither national majorities nor kinstates adequately acknowledge the specific pressures faced by borderland populations, nor the degree to which these communities depend on open borders for their social and economic vitality. This convergence highlights an important point for policy and governance: borderlands are simultaneously spaces of integration and spaces of vulnerability, and both dimensions require recognition if border policies are to align with the lived realities of those who inhabit them.

Narratives of Europe compared

Across all case studies, the EU is primarily understood through the prism of Schengen and the freedom of movement it guarantees. Research participants perceive Europe as a practical framework that enables everyday mobility, cross-border living, and access to opportunities such as work, study, and EU-funded development. The presence of borders is acknowledged, but in a Schengen context they are largely perceived as non-restrictive, reinforcing the idea that open mobility is the EU's most tangible contribution to borderland life. The descriptions of the border experiences at the only non-Schengen border (GR-TR) confirm the privilege of living at a Schengen border.

Building on this, our analyses of minority media and young people's narratives reveal a dominant pattern best described as banal Europeanism, in which Europe is embedded in daily life yet rarely at the forefront of conscious identity. Young people, who have grown up in a Europe with open Schengen borders, perceive the European Union primarily as a functional space of opportunity and freedom. Open borders, ease of mobility, and the possibility of cross-border education or employment are taken as natural features of their social landscape. The EU, in this framing, operates as an enabling backdrop: its benefits are recognized in practical terms, yet they elicit little explicit political engagement or emotional investment.

This normalization of Europe has a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, it signals the deep integration of the European project into the lived realities of its citizens. On the other hand, it points to a certain structural fragility: without a strong affective or symbolic attachment, support for the EU may prove vulnerable in moments of political strain or when the perceived benefits are disrupted. In the absence of a compelling shared narrative of heritage, values, or collective purpose, Europe remains 'in the shadows' and risks being valued primarily as a service provider rather than as a community of belonging.

The media analysis reinforces this picture of a somewhat hidden European presence. With the exception of the *Dolomiten* newspaper, local media rarely link European-level decisions to border policies or minority

experiences. Re-bordering processes are framed overwhelmingly as the responsibility of individual nation-states, especially kin states, rather than as part of a wider European political arena. This separation of local and European spheres may limit the visibility of the EU as a political actor in areas where its influence may be particularly central, reinforcing the perception of Europe as remote from local concerns. Moreover, it constrains the development of a shared European public sphere, as debates about mobility, borders, and identity remain nationally framed, even when their underlying dynamics are transnational, and even in contexts such as borderlands and minority communities which are often considered to be particularly open and ready for Europeanisation.

Interestingly, in both South Tyrol and Schleswig, positive perceptions of the EU's role in protecting minorities are strongly shaped by earlier minority rights settlements that were established independently of the EU. While these arrangements originated from national or bilateral agreements and broader Council of Europe frameworks, many people now associate them with the EU, seeing it as a guarantor of diversity and minority protection. In this sense, the EU benefits from existing settlements by being retrospectively linked to rights and protections that it did not directly create, but which fit well with its broader image as a promoter of tolerance and cultural diversity. By contrast, in Zaolzie there is no clear perception of the EU as a guarantor of minority rights, while in Southern Slovakia several respondents explicitly lamented the EU's lack of concrete action in the field of autochthonous ethnic minority protection.

The results from the Turkish-Greek borderland case present a differing view on Europe. Europe was imagined both as a space of rights and hope and as a failed promise, with participants expressing disappointment at EU exclusion. Nonetheless, they were simultaneously hopeful that the EU might support minority rights in their context and reduce border hardships.

Taken together, these contrasting perceptions illustrate both the reach and the limits of the EU's functional legitimacy as a minority protector. While many consider the EU as a protective actor, others remain critical, suggesting that minority protections are not universally experienced or trusted. This uneven perception highlights a critical tension in the EU's normative role: it aspires to be a guardian of diversity, yet this role is contingent on local histories and political contexts.

7. Concluding Remarks

Authors: Alice Engl, Johanna Mitterhofer, Marcus Nicolson

This report has examined how young people from national minority communities in European border regions perceive borders, Europe, and the European Union. By foregrounding young people's own narratives and creative expressions, the study has moved beyond elite- or media-driven accounts, highlighting the lived realities of minority youth who navigate borderlands daily. Methodologically, this study underscores the value of participatory and arts-based approaches for researching political issues. These methods have helped us to analyze what has been described as the aesthetics of border studies (Brambilla and Pötzsch, 2017). Zine-making and interviews created a space for young people to engage in a debate on sometimes rather abstract issues and to articulate perspectives that are often overlooked, revealing both the ordinariness and complexity of border life. These methods not only generated rich

empirical data but also validated the role of creative tools in engaging younger generations in discussions about borders and Europe.

Overall, the report highlights the importance of understanding borders and Europe from below, through the eyes of those young people growing up at the margins of nation-states, in European borderlands. It calls for further research into how minority youth experience and shape European integration, especially in times of re-bordering and sociopolitical uncertainty. By amplifying these voices, the study contributes to a more inclusive vision of Europe—one that recognizes borders not only as lines of separation but also as resources, connectors, bridges, and everyday realities in the lives of its citizens.

A key comparative finding of this study is that while local histories and geopolitical contexts strongly shape how young minorities experience borders, several cross-cutting themes emerged across all case studies: the normalization of open borders, the perception of borders as connectors rather than barriers, and the embedding of Europe in everyday life through “banal Europeanism”. At the same time, the Turkish-Greek case shows that borders can remain militarized, exclusionary, and threatening, and that borderlands are not uniformly experienced.

Our analysis also reveals a notable gap between minority media narratives and young people’s perceptions. While media outlets often frame borders and Europe in politicized or securitized terms, young people tend to adopt pragmatic, functional perspectives. This divergence underscores that youth voices are often underrepresented in public narratives, despite their importance for the future of European integration.

Furthermore, the findings highlight a paradox of European integration: for many young borderlanders, the EU is deeply embedded in daily life yet often taken for granted. This “banal Europeanism” signals both resilience, because integration has become normalized, and fragility, since support for the EU may weaken during crises if it is perceived only as a service provider rather than as a community of belonging.

However, our research highlights the agency of minority youth, which transcends binary categorisations of “national” belonging by articulating strong regional or 'in-between' identifications. Rather than being incompatible with Europe, these identities offer alternative patterns of pluralism and transnational lifestyle.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests three key implications. First, EU and national policymakers should acknowledge both the integration and vulnerability of borderlands, ensuring that re-bordering policies do not disproportionately harm minority communities. Second, greater consistency in minority protection is needed: the EU’s reputation as a guarantor of minority rights is undermined when support is conditional (as in enlargement) but inconsistent afterwards. Third, youth voices should be actively integrated into policymaking processes, not only through formal consultations but also via creative and participatory approaches that allow young people to articulate their perspectives in meaningful ways.

For border studies scholarship, the report makes two key contributions. Conceptually, it challenges top-down and elite-focused frameworks by centering on the bottom-up perspectives of minority youth. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of narrative and arts-based participatory methods in revealing dimensions of Border and European studies that are often overlooked.

Finally, future research should extend this bottom-up perspective in other directions, such as (1) comparative intergenerational analysis to capture how perceptions are similar and how they differ between younger and older members of minority communities; (2) longitudinal studies to examine how minority-

youth perceptions evolve in response to ongoing crises such as war in Ukraine, migration, and climate risks; and (3) comparative research beyond EU borders to offer further insights into how minority youth navigate borders and supranational frameworks in different regional contexts.

By addressing these questions, future work can enhance our understanding of how Europe is lived, imagined, and contested by those at its margins; by young adults who are not just subjects of bordering processes but also potential agents of integration and change.

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9. Annex: Translations of the Executive Summary

Česky

Projekt B-SHAPES se zaměřuje na to, jak lidé vnímají Evropu, přičemž zvláštní pozornost věnuje tomu, jak narativy o hranicích a procesy re-borderingu/návratu významu ovlivňují tato vnímání. Tato zpráva konkrétně zkoumá, jak mladí lidé z národnostních menšin žijících v evropských pohraničních regionech vnímají hranice, Evropu a Evropskou unii (EU). Opírá se o pět případových studií – Jižní Tyrolsko (Itálie–Rakousko), Zaolzie/Těšínské Slezsko (Polsko–Česko), Severní a Jižní Šlesvicko (Dánsko–Německo), jižní Slovensko (Maďarsko–Slovensko) a Západní Thrákie (Řecko–Bulharsko–Turecko) – aby nabídla pohledy zdola na každodenní zkušenosti s hranicemi a evropskou integrací.

Studie, uskutečněná v letech 2024–2025, se zaměřila na mladé dospělé ve věku 18–31 let a kombinovala polostrukturované rozhovory a workshopy tvorby zinů. Tyto přístupy umožnily účastníkům vyjádřit své narativy vizuálně i textově/verbálně, a tím vytvořit perspektivy přesahující diskurzy elit a médií. Porovnáním výpovědí mladých lidí s menšinovými mediálními narativy (Engl et al., 2024) studie zdůrazňuje jak shody, tak i rozpory mezi veřejným a osobním chápáním Evropy. Analýza odhaluje výraznou mezeru mezi menšinovými mediálními narativy a vnímáním mladých lidí. Zatímco média často rámují hranice a Evropu politizovaně nebo optikou bezpečnosti, mladí lidé mají tendenci přijímat pragmatické, funkční pohledy. Tento rozdíl ukazuje, že hlasy mládeže jsou ve veřejných narativech často nedostatečně zastoupené, přestože jsou klíčové pro budoucnost evropské integrace.

Zjištění ukazují, že pro většinu účastníků studie jsou hranice prožívány jako otevřené a do značné míry neviditelné – výsledek schengenské mobility a znormalizovaných přeshraničních praktik. Hranice jsou často vnímány jako příležitosti, nikoli bariéry, a spojují se se vzděláním, prací, nákupy, volným časem a rodinnými vazbami. Přesto zůstávají symbolicky významné: mnozí mladí lidé označují kulturní a jazykové rozdíly, spíše než státní hranice, za „skutečné“ hranice ve svých životech. Historické dědictví a rodinné vzpomínky také nadále utvářejí představy o hranicích, i tam, kde fyzické hraniční kontroly již zmizely.

Okamžiky narušení volnosti překračování hranic, jako byla pandemie COVID-19, odhalily křehkost tohoto pocitu otevřenosti. Nedávné procesy znovuohraničování ukázaly, jak silně jsou mladí lidé z menšin závislí na mobilitě, čímž posílily hodnotu, kterou přikládají Schengenu, ale zároveň jim připomněly i potenciální nejistotu evropské integrace. Srovnání s vnějšími hranicemi Schengenského prostoru, například mezi Řeckem a Tureckem, ještě více zdůraznilo kontrast mezi každodenní otevřeností a realitou vyloučení jinde.

Vnímání Evropy a EU bylo obecně pragmatické. Účastníci zdůrazňovali hmatatelné přínosy členství v EU – zejména volný pohyb, Erasmus, Interrail a regionální fondy EU – spíše než symbolickou identifikaci s Evropou. EU byla často brána jako samozřejmá součást každodenního života, což vytvářelo formu „banálního evropanství“. Zatímco někteří mladí lidé oceňovali EU jako garanta menšinových práv a zdroj financování, jiní ji vnímali jako vzdálenou, neefektivní nebo nekonzistentní v ochraně menšin. Pozitivní vnímání role EU ve dvou případech (Jižní Tyrolsko a Severní a Jižní Šlesvicko) bylo silně ovlivněno dřívějšími dohodami o menšinových právech, které byly vytvořeny nezávisle na EU. Ačkoli tyto dohody vycházely z národních či bilaterálních smluv a širšího rámce Rady Evropy, účastníci výzkumu v těchto pohraničních oblastech je spojovali s EU, kterou vnímali jako garanta rozmanitosti a ochrany menšin.

Výrazně se projevily regionální a menšinové identity. Mnoho účastníků se identifikovalo především se svým pohraničním či národnostním menšinovým společenstvím – jako Jižní Tyrolec, Zaolziak (Polák žijící v české části Těšínska), Šlesvičan či Maďar na Slovensku (felvidéki) – spíše než s širšími národními nebo evropskými kategoriemi. Tyto lokalizované identity často nabízely způsob, jak překračovat národní rozdělení, a zároveň potvrzovaly kulturní odlišnost.

Celkově zpráva ukazuje, že mladí lidé z menšin v pohraničních regionech normalizují evropskou integraci prostřednictvím svých každodenních praktik, ale ne vždy artikulují silné emocionální pouto k EU. Jejich pohledy odrážejí pragmatické přijetí mobility a příležitostí, doplněné skepsí vůči institucionálnímu závazku k ochraně menšinových práv. Tato zjištění poukazují jak na úspěchy, tak na zranitelnosti evropské integrace v dobách krize a zároveň podtrhují důležitost naslouchání hlasům mladých lidí při formování inkluzivních vizí budoucnosti Evropy.

Dansk

B-SHAPES-projektet fokuserer på, hvordan mennesker opfatter Europa, med særlig opmærksomhed på, hvordan grænsefortællinger og processer med genoprettelse af grænser og grænsekontrol kan påvirke disse opfattelser. Denne rapport undersøger specifikt, hvordan unge fra nationale mindretalssamfund i europæiske grænseregioner opfatter grænser, Europa og Den Europæiske Union (EU). Den bygger på fem casestudier – Sydtyrol (Italien–Østrig), Zaolzie/Těšín Silesia (Polen–Tjekkiet), Nord- og Sydslesvig (Danmark–Tyskland), Sydslovakiet (Ungarn–Slovakiet) og Vestthrakien (Grækenland–Bulgarien–Tyrkiet) – for at give bottom-up-indsigt i hverdagens oplevelser af grænser og europæisk integration.

Undersøgelsen, der blev gennemført i 2024-2025, fokuserede på unge voksne i alderen 18-31 år og anvendte en kombination af semistrukturerede interviews og workshops i zine-produktion. Disse tilgange gjorde det muligt for deltagerne at udtrykke deres fortællinger både visuelt og tekstmæssigt, hvilket skabte perspektiver, der går ud over eliteniveauet og mediediskurserne. Ved at sammenligne unges beretninger med minoritetsmediers fortællinger (Engl et al., 2024) fremhæver undersøgelsen både konvergenser og uoverensstemmelser mellem den offentlige og den personlige forståelse af Europa. Analysen afslører en markant kløft mellem minoritetsmediers fortællinger og unges opfattelse. Mens medierne ofte fremstiller grænser og Europa i politiserede eller sikkerhedsmæssige termer, har unge en tendens til at anlægge pragmatiske, funktionelle perspektiver. Denne divergens understreger, at unges stemmer ofte er underrepræsenterede i offentlige fortællinger, på trods af deres betydning for fremtiden for den europæiske integration.

Resultaterne viser, at de fleste deltagere i undersøgelsen oplever grænser som åbne og stort set usynlige, hvilket er et resultat af Schengen-mobiliteten og normaliseringen af grænseoverskridende praksis. Grænser opfattes ofte som muligheder snarere end barrierer, der er forbundet med uddannelse, arbejde, shopping, fritid og familiebånd. De forbliver dog symbolsk betydningsfulde: Mange unge betragter kulturelle og sproglige skel snarere end statsgrænser som de »rigtige« grænser i deres liv. Historiske arv og familieerindringer fortsætter også med at forme opfattelsen af grænser, selv hvor de fysiske grænsekontroller er forsvundet.

Forstyrrende begivenheder, såsom COVID-19-pandemien, afslørede denne følelse af åbenhedens skrøbelighed. De seneste begivenheder med genindførelse af grænser og grænsekontrol har understreget,

hvor stærkt unge fra minoriteter er afhængige af mobilitet, hvilket forstærker den værdi, de tillægger Schengen-aftalen, men også minder dem om den potentielle usikkerhed ved den europæiske integration. Sammenligninger med sikrede ydre grænser, såsom den græsk-tyrkiske grænse, understreger yderligere kontrasten mellem den daglige åbenhed og virkeligheden med udelukkelse andre steder.

Opfattelsen af Europa og EU var generelt pragmatisk. Deltagerne fremhævede de konkrete fordele ved EU-medlemskab, især fri bevægelighed, Erasmus, Interrail og EU's regionale finansiering, frem for symbolsk identifikation med Europa. EU blev ofte taget for givet som en baggrundsbetingelse for dagligdagen, hvilket skabte en form for »banal europæisme«. Mens nogle unge værdsatte EU som garant for mindretalsrettigheder og kilde til finansiering, betragtede andre det som fjernt, ineffektivt eller inkonsekvent i sin beskyttelse af mindretal. Den positive opfattelse af EU's rolle i to af tilfældene (Sydtyrol og Nord- og Sydslesvig) var stærkt præget af tidligere mindretalsrettighedsaftaler, der var indgået uafhængigt af EU. Selvom disse aftaler stammede fra nationale eller bilaterale aftaler og bredere rammer nedfældet i Europarådets konventioner, forbandt forskningsdeltagerne i disse grænseområder dem med EU og betragtede det som en garant for mangfoldighed og beskyttelse af mindretal.

Regionale og minoritetsidentiteter fremstod som særligt stærke. Mange deltagere identificerede sig først og fremmest med deres grænseområde eller nationale minoritetssamfund, sydtyroler, zaolziak, schleswiger, ungarere i Slovakiet, tyrkere i Grækenland, snarere end med bredere nationale eller europæiske kategorier. Disse lokaliserede identiteter gav ofte mulighed for at overskride nationale skel og samtidig bekræfte kulturel særpræg.

Samlet set viser rapporten, at unge fra mindretal i grænseregioner normaliserer den europæiske integration gennem deres daglige praksis, men ikke nødvendigvis udtrykker en stærk følelsesmæssig tilknytning til EU. Deres synspunkter afspejler en pragmatisk tilslutning til mobilitet og muligheder, tempereret af skepsis over for institutionernes engagement i mindretalsrettigheder. Disse resultater fremhæver både resultaterne og sårbarhederne ved den europæiske integration i krisetider, samtidig med at de understreger vigtigheden af at lytte til de unges stemmer i udformningen af en inkluderende vision for Europas fremtid.

Deutsch

Das Projekt B-SHAPES untersucht, wie Menschen Europa wahrnehmen, und achtet dabei besonders darauf, wie Grenznarrative und Grenzprozesse diese Wahrnehmungen beeinflussen können. Dieser Bericht untersucht insbesondere, wie junge Menschen aus nationalen Minderheitengemeinschaften in europäischen Grenzregionen sowohl Grenzen, als auch Europa und die Europäische Union (EU) wahrnehmen. Der Bericht stützt sich auf fünf Fallstudien (Südtirol (Italien–Österreich), Zaolzie/Teschener Schlesien (Polen–Tschechien), Nord- und Südschleswig (Dänemark–Deutschland), Südslowakei (Ungarn–Slowakei) und Westthrakien (Griechenland–Bulgarien–Türkei)), um Bottom-up-Einblicke in die alltäglichen Erfahrungen junger Menschen mit Grenzen und der europäischen Integration zu gewinnen.

Die Studie, die zwischen 2024 und 2025 durchgeführt wurde, konzentriert sich auf junge Erwachsene im Alter von 18 bis 31 Jahren und kombiniert halbstrukturierte Interviews mit “Zine-Workshops”. Diese Ansätze ermöglichten es den Teilnehmern und Teilnehmerinnen, ihre Erzählungen sowohl visuell als auch textuell auszudrücken und Perspektiven zu entwickeln, die über die Elite- und Mediendiskurse hinausgehen. Durch den Vergleich der Erzählungen junger Menschen mit den Narrativen der

Minderheitenmedien (Engl et al., 2024) hebt die Studie sowohl Konvergenzen als auch Diskrepanzen zwischen dem medial-öffentlichen und dem persönlichen Verständnis von Europa hervor. Die Analyse zeigt eine bemerkenswerte Kluft zwischen den Narrativen der Minderheitenmedien und den Wahrnehmungen junger Menschen. Während die Medien Grenzen und Europa oft in politisierten oder sicherheitspolitischen Begriffen darstellen, neigen junge Menschen dazu, pragmatische, funktionale Perspektiven einzunehmen. Diese Divergenz unterstreicht, dass die Stimmen der Jugendlichen in öffentlichen Narrativen oft unterrepräsentiert sind, obwohl sie für die Zukunft der europäischen Integration von großer Bedeutung sind.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die meisten Studienteilnehmer und -teilnehmerinnen Grenzen als offen und weitgehend unsichtbar erleben, was auf die Mobilität im Schengen-Raum und die Normalisierung grenzüberschreitender Praktiken zurückzuführen ist. Grenzen werden eher als Chancen, denn als Hindernisse verstanden und mit Bildung, Arbeit, Einkaufen, Freizeit und Familie in Verbindung gebracht. Dennoch behalten sie ihre symbolische Bedeutung, wobei viele junge Menschen nicht ungbedingt Staatsgrenzen sondern eher kulturelle und sprachliche Trennungen allgemein als die „wirklichen" Grenzen in ihrem Leben betrachten. Familienerinnerungen und historische Bilder prägen weiterhin die Vorstellung von Grenzen, selbst dort, wo physische Grenzkontrollen verschwunden sind.

"Störungsmoment" wie die COVID-19-Pandemie haben offenbart, wie fragil dieses Gefühls der Offenheit von Grenzen ist. Die Wiedereinführung von Grenzkontrollen haben deutlich gemacht, wie stark junge Menschen aus Minderheiten auf Mobilität angewiesen sind. Vergleiche mit gesicherten Außengrenzen, wie beispielsweise der griechisch-türkischen Grenze, unterstreichen den Kontrast zwischen der alltäglichen Offenheit von innereuropäischen Grenzen und der Realität der Ausgrenzung andernorts.

Die jungen Studienteilnehmer und –teilnehmerinnen nehmen Europa und die EU im Allgemeinen pragmatisch wahr. Sie betonten die konkreten Vorteile der EU-Mitgliedschaft, insbesondere die Freizügigkeit, Programme wie Erasmus und EU-Förderungen, und weniger die symbolische Identifikation mit Europa. Die EU wurde oft als selbstverständliche Rahmenbedingung des täglichen Lebens angesehen, was zu einer Form des „banalen Europäismus" führte. Während einige junge Menschen die EU als Garant für Minderheitenrechte und als Finanzierungsquelle schätzten, betrachteten andere sie als distanziert, ineffizient oder inkonsequent beim Schutz von Minderheiten. Die äußerst positive Wahrnehmung der Rolle der EU in zwei der Fälle (Südtirol und Nord- und Südschleswig) wurde stark durch frühere Vereinbarungen zum Minderheitenschutz geprägt, die unabhängig von der EU getroffen wurden. Obwohl diese Vereinbarungen auf nationalen oder bilateralen Abkommen und umfassenderen Rahmenwerken des Europarats beruhten, assoziierten die Forschungsteilnehmer und -teilnehmerinnen in diesen Grenzgebieten sie mit der EU und sahen in ihr einen Garanten für Vielfalt und Minderheitenschutz.

Regionale und Minderheitenidentitäten erwiesen sich als besonders stark. Viele der jungen Menschen identifizierten sich in erster Linie mit ihrer Grenzregion oder nationalen Minderheitengemeinschaft, also als Südtiroler, Zaolziak, Schleswiger oder Ungar in der Slowakei, und weniger mit übergeordneten nationalen oder europäischen Kategorien. Diese lokalisierten Identitäten boten oft eine Möglichkeit, nationale Trennungen zu überwinden und gleichzeitig die kulturelle Besonderheit zu bekräftigen.

Insgesamt zeigt der Bericht, dass junge Angehörige von Minderheiten in Grenzregionen die europäische Integration durch ihre alltäglichen Praktiken normalisieren, aber nicht unbedingt eine starke emotionale Bindung zur EU zum Ausdruck bringen. Ihre Ansichten spiegeln eine pragmatische Akzeptanz von Mobilität und Chancen wider, die durch Skepsis gegenüber dem institutionellen Engagement für

Minderheitenrechte gemildert wird. Diese Ergebnisse verdeutlichen sowohl die Erfolge als auch die Schwachstellen der europäischen Integration in Krisenzeiten und unterstreichen gleichzeitig, wie wichtig es ist, den Stimmen junger Menschen Gehör zu schenken, um eine integrative Vision für die Zukunft Europas zu entwickeln.

Italiano

Il progetto B-SHAPES si incentra sul modo in cui le persone percepiscono l'Europa, prestando particolare attenzione a come le narrazioni sui confini e sui processi di ridefinizione dei confini possano influenzare tali percezioni. In particolare, questo report approfondisce il modo in cui i giovani appartenenti a minoranze nazionali nelle regioni europee di confine vivono i confini, l'Europa e l'Unione europea (UE). Si basa su cinque casi di studio che riportano esperienze quotidiane di confini e di integrazione europea: Alto Adige (Italia-Austria), Zaolzie/Slesia di Těšín (Polonia-Repubblica Ceca), Schleswig settentrionale e meridionale (Danimarca-Germania), Slovacchia meridionale (Ungheria-Slovacchia) e Tracia occidentale (Grecia-Bulgaria-Turchia).

Lo studio, condotto tra il 2024 ed il 2025, ha coinvolto giovani adulti di età compresa tra i 18 e i 31 anni, utilizzando una combinazione di interviste semi-strutturate e laboratori di creazione di “fanzine”. Questi approcci hanno permesso alle e ai partecipanti di esprimere le loro narrazioni sia visivamente che testualmente, generando prospettive innovative che si differenziano dai discorsi delle élite politiche e dei media. Confrontando i resoconti dei giovani con le narrazioni dei quotidiani pubblicati dalle minoranze in tali territori (Engl et al., 2024), lo studio evidenzia sia le convergenze che le divergenze tra ciò che il pubblico e le persone pensano e comprendono dell'Europa. L'analisi rivela un notevole divario tra le narrazioni dei quotidiani delle minoranze e le percezioni dei giovani. Mentre questi giornali spesso inquadrano le frontiere e l'Europa in termini politicizzati o di sicurezza, i giovani tendono a adottare prospettive pragmatiche e funzionali. Questa divergenza sottolinea che le voci dei giovani sono spesso sottorappresentate nelle narrazioni pubbliche, nonostante la loro importanza per il futuro dell'integrazione europea.

I risultati mostrano che, per la maggior parte delle e dei partecipanti allo studio, i confini vengono vissuti come passaggi aperti e in gran parte invisibili, grazie alla mobilità garantita dalla zona Schengen e alla normalizzazione delle pratiche transfrontaliere. I confini sono spesso intesi come opportunità piuttosto che come barriere, associati all'istruzione, al lavoro, allo shopping, al tempo libero e ai legami familiari. Tuttavia, essi rimangono simbolicamente significativi: molti giovani considerano le divisioni culturali e linguistiche, piuttosto che i confini statali, come le “vere” frontiere nella loro vita. Anche l'eredità storica e i ricordi familiari continuano a plasmare il modo in cui vengono immaginati i confini, anche laddove i controlli fisici alle frontiere sono scomparsi.

Grandi momenti di sconvolgimento, come la pandemia di COVID-19, hanno, tuttavia, messo in luce la fragilità di questo senso di apertura. I recenti eventi di ripristino delle frontiere hanno evidenziato quanto le persone giovani appartenenti alle minoranze facciano affidamento sulla mobilità, rafforzando il valore che attribuiscono alla zona Schengen, ma anche ricordando loro la potenziale precarietà dell'integrazione europea. Il confronto con le frontiere esterne chiuse e rese “sicure”, come quella greco-turca, ha ulteriormente sottolineato il contrasto tra l'apertura quotidiana e la realtà dell'esclusione.

Per quanto riguarda le percezioni dell'Europa e dell'UE, esse sono generalmente pragmatiche. Le persone partecipanti hanno sottolineato i vantaggi tangibili dell'adesione all'UE, in particolare la libera circolazione, la partecipazione a programmi come l'Erasmus, i viaggi Interrail e i finanziamenti regionali dell'UE, piuttosto che l'identificazione simbolica con l'Europa. L'UE è stata spesso data per scontata come condizione basilare della vita quotidiana, producendo una forma di "banale europeismo". Mentre alcuni giovani apprezzano l'UE come garante dei diritti delle minoranze e fonte di finanziamenti, altri la considerano distante, inefficiente o incoerente nella sua protezione delle minoranze. La percezione positiva del ruolo dell'UE in due dei casi (Alto Adige e Schleswig settentrionale e meridionale) è stata fortemente influenzata dai precedenti accordi sui diritti delle minoranze, stabiliti indipendentemente dall'UE. Sebbene tali accordi abbiano avuto origine da accordi nazionali o bilaterali e nel quadro più ampio dell'azione del Consiglio d'Europa, le persone partecipanti alla ricerca in queste zone di confine li hanno associati all'UE, considerandola una garante della diversità e della protezione delle minoranze.

Infine, è emerso che le identità regionali e minoritarie sono particolarmente forti. Molte persone partecipanti si sono identificate principalmente con la loro comunità di frontiera o minoritaria nazionale, altoatesina, zaolziak, schleswigiana, ungherese in Slovacchia, piuttosto che con categorie nazionali o europee più ampie. Queste identità locali hanno spesso offerto un modo per superare le divisioni nazionali, affermando al contempo la peculiarità culturale.

Nel complesso, il rapporto mostra che le persone giovani appartenenti alle minoranze nelle regioni di confine normalizzano l'integrazione europea attraverso le loro pratiche quotidiane, ma non esprimono necessariamente un forte attaccamento emotivo all'UE. Pur essendo scettici nei confronti dell'impegno istituzionale dell'UE a favore dei diritti delle minoranze, le loro opinioni riflettono un approccio pragmatico alla mobilità e alle opportunità. Ciò evidenzia sia i risultati raggiunti, sia le vulnerabilità dell'integrazione europea in tempi di crisi, sottolineando al contempo l'importanza di ascoltare la voce dei giovani per definire e promuovere visioni inclusive per il futuro dell'Europa.

Magyar

A B-SHAPES projekt arra összpontosít, hogy az emberek hogyan érzékelik Európát, különös figyelmet fordítva arra, hogy a határokat érintő domináns narratívák és a határok újra-megjelölésének folyamatai (pl. határellenőrzések újra-bevezetése) hogyan befolyásolhatja ezeket az érzékeléseket. Ez a jelentés kifejezetten azt vizsgálja, hogy az európai határvidékeken élő nemzeti kisebbségi közösségekhez tartozó fiatalok hogyan érzékelik a határokat, Európát és az Európai Uniót (EU). Öt esettanulmányra támaszkodik – Dél-Tirol (Olaszország–Ausztria), Zaolzie/Těšín Szilézia (Lengyelország–Csehország), Észak- és Dél-Schleswig (Dánia–Németország), Dél-Szlovákia (Magyarország–Szlovákia) és Nyugat-Trákia (Görögország–Bulgária–Törökország) –, hogy alulról felfelé építkező betekintést nyújtson a határok és az európai integráció mindennapi tapasztalataiba.

A 2024–2025-ben végzett kutatás 18–31 éves fiatal felnőttekre összpontosított, félig strukturált interjúk és magazinkészítő műhelyek kombinációját alkalmazva. Ezek a megközelítések lehetővé tették a részvevők számára, hogy narratíváikat vizuálisan és szövegesen is kifejezzék, így olyan perspektívákat létrehozva, amelyek túllépnek az elit szintű és a médiában megjelenő diskurzusokon. A fiatalok beszámolóit összehasonlítva a kisebbségi média narratíváival (Engl et al. 2024) a tanulmány rávilágít az Európáról

alkotott közéleti diskurzusok és a személyes megértés közötti konvergenciákra és eltérésekre. Az elemzés jelentős különbséget tár fel a kisebbségi média narratívái és a fiatalok percepciói között. Míg a média gyakran átpolitizált vagy biztonsági szempontok alapján közelíti meg a határok és Európa kérdéskörét, a fiatalok inkább pragmatikus, funkcionális szemszögből tekintenek ezekre. Ez az eltérés rávilágít arra, hogy a fiatalok hangja gyakran alulreprezentált a közvéleményben annak ellenére, hogy fontos szerepet játszanak az európai integráció jövője szempontjából.

Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a tanulmány részvevőinek többsége a határokat nyitottnak és nagyrészt láthatatlannak éli meg, ami a schengeni mobilitásnak és a határon átnyúló gyakorlatok normalizálódásának köszönhető. A határokat gyakran inkább lehetőségként, mint akadályként értelmezik, és az oktatással, a munkával, a bevásárlással, a szabadidővel és a családi kötelékekkel hozzák összefüggésbe. Szimbolikus jelentőségük azonban továbbra is megmarad: sok fiatal inkább a kulturális és nyelvi megosztottságot, mint az államhatárokat tekinti életük „valódi" határoknak. A történelmi örökség és a családi emlékek is továbbra is alakítják a határokról alkotott felfogásukat, még akkor is, amikor a fizikai határellenőrzés már megszűnt.

Az olyan zavaró események, mint a COVID-19-járvány felfedték ezen nyitottság törékenységét. A közelmúltbeli határ-újrajelölési események rávilágítottak arra, hogy a kisebbségi fiatalok milyen erősen támaszkodnak a mobilitásra, megerősítve a schengeni térség iránti elkötelezettségüket, de egyúttal emlékeztetve őket az európai integráció potenciális bizonytalanságaira is. A biztonsági szempontból megerősített külső határok, például a görög–török határ összehasonlítása tovább hangsúlyozta a mindennapi nyitottság és a máshol tapasztalható kirekesztés közötti ellentétet.

Európáról és az EU-ról általában pragmatikus vélemények alakultak ki. A részvevők az EU-tagság kézzelfogható előnyeit emelték ki, különösen a szabad mozgást, az Erasmus programot, az Interrail programot és az EU regionális finanszírozását, ahelyett, hogy szimbolikusan azonosultak volna Európával. Az EU-t gyakran a mindennapi élet háttérfeltételeként vették, ami egyfajta „banális európaizmusként" interpretálható. Míg egyes fiatalok az EU-t a kisebbségi jogok őreként és finanszírozási forrásként értékelték, mások távoli, hatástalan vagy következetlen szervezetnek tartották a kisebbségek védelme terén. Az EU szerepének pozitív megítélését két esetben (Dél-Tirol és Észak- és Dél-Schleswig) erősen befolyásolta a korábbi, az EU-tól függetlenül létrehozott kisebbségi jogi megállapodások. Bár ezek a megállapodások nemzeti vagy kétoldalú egyezményekből és az Európa Tanács tágabb kereteiből származnak, a kutatás részvevői ezeket az EU-val hozták összefüggésbe, az Uniót a sokszínűség és a kisebbségek védelmének garanciájának tekintették.

A regionális és kisebbségi identitások különösen erősnek bizonyultak. Sok részvevő elsősorban a határvidéki vagy nemzeti kisebbségi közösségéhez, dél-tiroli, zaolziak, schleswig-i, illetve felvidéki/szlovákiai magyar identitásához kötődött és csak másodlagosan a tágabb, nemzeti vagy európai kategóriákhoz. Ezek a regionális identitások gyakran lehetőséget nyújtottak a nemzeti megosztottságok túllépésére, miközben megerősítették a kulturális sajátosságokat.

Összességében a jelentés azt mutatja, hogy a határvidéki régiók kisebbségi fiataljai mindennapi gyakorlatukban normalizálják az európai integrációt, de nem feltétlenül fejezik ki erős érzelmi kötődésüket az EU-hoz. Véleményük a mobilitás és a lehetőségek pragmatikus elfogadását tükrözi, amelyet a kisebbségi jogok iránti intézményi elkötelezettség körüli szkepticizmus mérsékelt. Ezek az eredmények rávilágítanak az európai integráció eredményeire és sebezhetőségére válságok idején, miközben hangsúlyozzák annak

fontosságát, hogy a fiatalok hangjára is figyelmet kell szentelni az Európa jövőjéről alkotott inkluzív víziók kialakításakor.

Polish

Projekt B-SHAPES koncentruje się na tym, jak ludzie postrzegają Europę, zwracając szczególną uwagę na to, jak narracje dotyczące granic i procesy konstruowania granic mogą wpływać na to postrzeganie. Niniejszy raport bada, jak młodzi ludzie ze społeczności mniejszości narodowych w europejskich regionach przygranicznych postrzegają granice, Europę i Unię Europejską (UE). Raport opiera się na pięciu studiach przypadków – Południowym Tyrolu (Włochy–Austria), Zaolziu/Śląsku Cieszyńskim (Polska–Czechy), Północnym i Południowym Szlezwiku (Dania–Niemcy), południowej Słowacji (Węgry–Słowacja) oraz zachodniej Tracji (Grecja–Bułgaria–Turcja) – aby zapewnić oddolny wgląd w codzienne doświadczenia związane z granicami i integracją europejską.

Badanie, przeprowadzone w latach 2024–2025, skupiało się na młodych dorosłych w wieku 18–31 lat i wykorzystywało połączenie częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów oraz warsztatów tworzenia zinów. Takie podejście umożliwiło uczestnikom i uczestniczkom wyrażenie swoich narracji zarówno wizualnie, jak i tekstowo, generując perspektywy wykraczające poza dyskursy elit i mediów. Porównując relacje młodzieży z narracjami mediów mniejszościowych (Engl et al., 2024), badanie podkreśla zarówno zbieżności, jak i rozbieżności między publicznym i osobistym rozumieniem Europy. Analiza ujawnia znaczną rozbieżność między narracjami mediów mniejszościowych a postrzeganiem młodzieży. Podczas gdy media często przedstawiają granice i Europę w kategoriach politycznych lub związanych z bezpieczeństwem, młodzież przyjmuje raczej pragmatyczne, funkcjonalne perspektywy. Ta rozbieżność pokazuje że głosy młodzieży są często niedostatecznie reprezentowane w narracjach publicznych, pomimo ich znaczenia dla przyszłości integracji europejskiej.

Wyniki badań pokazują, że dla większości uczestników i uczestniczek badania granice są postrzegane jako otwarte i w dużej mierze niewidoczne, co wynika z mobilności w ramach strefy Schengen i normalizacji praktyk transgranicznych. Granice są często postrzegane jako szanse a nie bariery, związane z edukacją, pracą, zakupami, wypoczynkiem i więzami rodzinnymi. Jednak granice pozostają symbolicznie istotne: wielu młodych ludzi postrzega podziały kulturowe i językowe, a nie granice państwowe, jako „prawdziwe" granice w swoim życiu. Dziedzictwo historyczne i wspomnienia rodzinne również nadal kształtują wyobrażenie o granicach, nawet tam, gdzie zniknęły fizyczne kontrole graniczne.

Jednakże, momenty kryzysowe, takie jak pandemia COVID-19, ujawniły kruchość tego poczucia otwartości. Ostatnie wydarzenia związane z ponownym wprowadzeniem granic uwydatniły, jak bardzo młodzież mniejszościowa polega na mobilności, wzmacniając wartość, jaką przywiązuje do strefy Schengen, ale także przypominając jej o potencjalnej niepewności integracji europejskiej. Porównanie z pilnie strzeżonymi granicami zewnętrznymi, takimi jak granica grecko-turecka, jeszcze bardziej podkreśliły kontrast między codzienną otwartością a rzeczywistością wykluczenia na innych obszarach granicznych.

Postrzeganie Europy i UE było w większosci nachechowane pragmatyczne. Uczestnicy podkreślali namacalne korzyści wynikające z członkostwa w UE, zwłaszcza swobodę przemieszczania się, program Erasmus, Interregi fundusze regionalne UE, a nie symboliczną identyfikację z Europą. UE była często traktowana jako coś oczywistego, jako element codziennego życia, co prowadziło do powstania formy

„banalnej europejskości". Podczas gdy niektórzy młodzi ludzie doceniali rolę UE jako gwaranta praw mniejszości i źródło finansowania, inni postrzegali ją jako odległą, nieefektywną lub niespójną w zakresie ochrony mniejszości. Pozytywne postrzeganie roli UE w dwóch przypadkach (Południowy Tyrol oraz Północny i Południowy Szlezwik) było silnie ukształtowane przez wcześniejsze porozumienia dotyczące praw mniejszości, które zostały zawarte niezależnie od UE. Chociaż porozumienia te wywodziły się z umów krajowych lub dwustronnych oraz szerszych ram Rady Europy, uczestnicy badania w tych obszarach przygranicznych kojarzyli je z UE, postrzegając ją jako gwaranta różnorodności i ochrony mniejszości.

Tożsamość regionalna i mniejszościowa okazała się szczególnie silna. Spora część uczestników i uczestniczek identyfikowała się przede wszystkim ze swoją społecznością przygraniczną lub mniejszością narodową, np. południowotyrolską, zaolziańską, szlezwicką, węgierską na Słowacji, a nie z szerszymi kategoriami narodowymi lub europejskimi. Te lokalne tożsamości często stanowiły sposób na omijanie podziałów narodowych przy jednoczesnym potwierdzeniu odrębności kulturowej.

Podsumowując, raport pokazuje, że młodzież mniejszościowa w regionach przygranicznych normalizuje integrację europejską poprzez swoje codzienne praktyki, ale niekoniecznie wyraża silne emocjonalne przywiązanie do UE. Ich poglądy odzwierciedlają pragmatyczne podejście do mobilności i możliwości, zabarwione sceptycyzmem co do instytucjonalnego zaangażowania UE na rzecz praw mniejszości. Wyniki te podkreślają zarówno osiągnięcia, jak i słabe punkty integracji europejskiej w czasach kryzysów, jednocześnie podkreślając znaczenie wsłuchiwania się w głosy młodych ludzi przy kształtowaniu integracyjnej wizji przyszłości Europy.