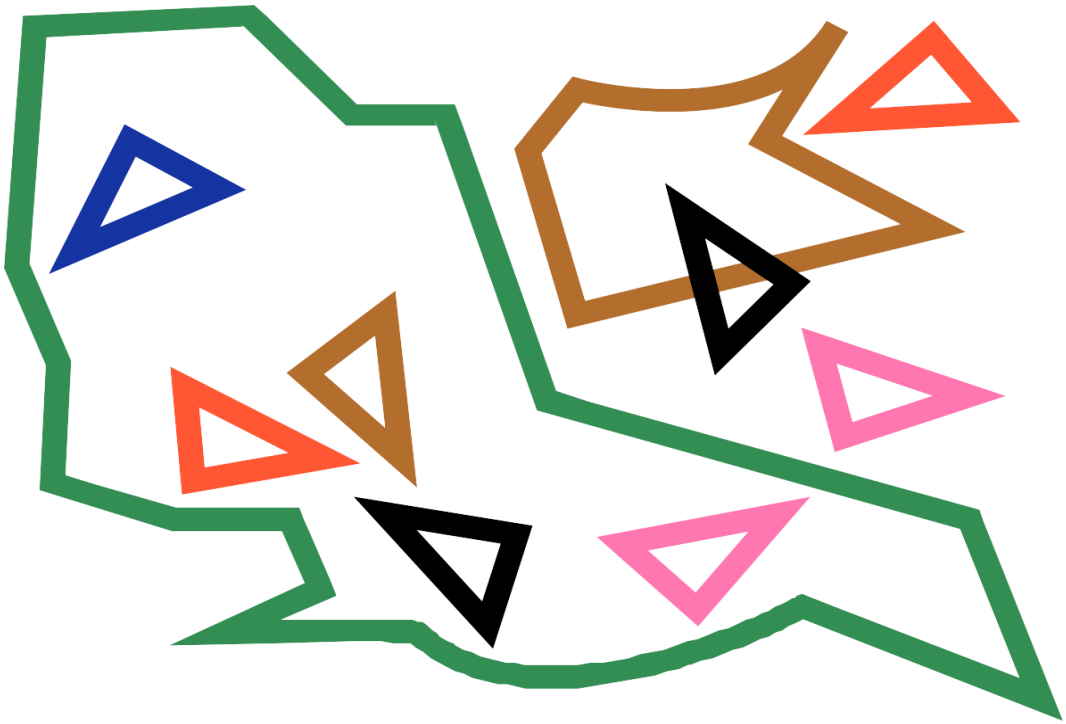
Policy Brief # 6

Borderlands in transformative times: policy explorations

B-Shapes - Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies



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Executive Summary

Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies (B-SHAPES) is a Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Action project that analyses and assesses how borders remain a key factor in shaping our understanding of societies. Eight European universities, a research institute, a national museum, a foundation, a political association, a consultancy, and an art collective have collaborated for three years. The special border region focus promises new insights into how borders shape perceptions of societies, and how the story of borders can be told differently than from a purely national perspective.

This policy briefing paper is the sixth in a series produced by B-SHAPES to support evidence-based policymaking and inclusive considerations for policymakers and those interested in the role of borders within the broader context of EU Cohesion policy and practice. Unlike previous Briefs in the series, the 6th B-Shapes Policy Brief does not focus on the project's empirical research; instead, it summarises policy-relevant observations and recommendations from a dialogue with policymakers at a policy seminar. During this meeting, policymakers discussed two contrasting scenarios that illustrate the future of cross-border cooperation and integration in Europe.

Prior notice

Modelling different scenarios produces two types of insights: a) what people feel would be the factors for dealing and responding to such a scenario; and b) those derived from the lenses people apply to every question and scenario. Some responses to the scenarios reflected ongoing awareness of the importance of border regions as places where citizens have a right to stay and as hubs of collaboration, development, and holistic, sustainable innovation. On the other hand, another set of responses to the scenarios strongly emphasised the role of military defence in border regions, shifting the dialogue from territorial cohesion principles towards a purely defence-oriented view of borders. In this context, some of the reactions to the scenarios reflect what is already a recognised wider tension between rhetorics and narratives about meeting defence and readiness imperatives across EU territories, and narratives which continue to reflect borders as the place where ongoing approaches to development cooperation can still take place and in fact make a positive contribution to the stability of borderlands and EU integration in changing geopolitical circumstances. This is particularly important given the global longitudinal evidence base provided by the Global Peace Index (GPI) and its Positive Peace matrix, which the GPI uses to assess conflict risks. The 2025 GPI report "finds that global peacefulness continues to decline and that many of the leading factors that precede major conflicts are higher than they have been since the end of WWII. More countries are increasing their levels of militarisation against the backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions, increasing conflict, the breakup of traditional alliances and rising economic uncertainty."

Context

This Policy Brief summarises policy-relevant observations and suggestions arising from a dialogue with policymakers held on 2 July 2025 in Brussels, Belgium. The B-Shapes policy seminar, hosted by the Delegation of the Basque Country to the EU, gathered about 20 participants, including representatives of key institutions in Brussels (European Parliament, European Commission and the Committee of the Regions) as well as representatives of regional and local governments, EGTCs and Euroregions, NGOs and representatives of the B-Shapes consortium.

The seminar began with the presentation of B-Shapes' key findings (Policy Briefs #1-#5) and the introduction of the two proposed "scenarios for Europe 2035": the *Fortress* and *Arkadia*. These scenarios were prepared by the B-Shapes partner, the Association of European Border Regions, in collaboration with the entire B-Shapes consortium, exaggerating some aspects of current geopolitics and pushing the limits to provoke reactions and animate discussions.

The *Fortress* scenario (abbreviated):

> *By 2035, the war in Ukraine has escalated into a wider conflict, placing Europe on a war economy footing. Following Donald Trump's presidency, which led to NATO's dissolution, the US adopted an isolationist policy under a new pacifist president. In Russia, Putin was overthrown after attempting to use nuclear weapons, but the new entity, Nova Rossiya, is now a military directorate facing economic collapse and the risk of disintegration. The EU has transformed into a Defence Union, suspending the Schengen Agreement and fortifying its external borders. With investments heavily focused on military self-reliance, other policies have been re-nationalised, and cohesion has disappeared. The continent is in a new Cold War, where a tense peace is maintained by the doctrine of nuclear deterrence* (link to the full document).

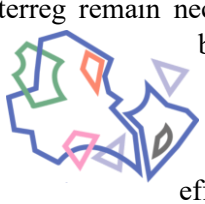
The discussion of the Fortress scenario revealed tension between an open Europe and the need for a closed, secure Europe (Defence Union). This focus on defence threatens grassroots cross-border cooperation. Perceptions of borders depend on history, generation (those who remember divisions vs. the Schengen generation), location (proximity to military threats), and the development level of regions (vibrant vs. peripheral and depopulating). When it comes to the EU's eastern borders, the historical context clearly shapes the relations with Russia. The invasion of Ukraine has frozen cooperation but has not unified attitudes—it has reinforced pre-existing tendencies. These regions face a dilemma: either keeping their hope for a return to normal cooperation or adopting a *Fortress Europe* strategy, focusing on defence against a permanent military and hybrid threat. In the EU regions bordering Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, perceptions of military threat vary, shaped by each region's unique history, geography, and the presence of allied forces. Many actors state the EU's conflict with Russia is an ongoing hybrid war, seen in cyberattacks & sabotage in the Baltics. The future is a state of permanent alert, akin to a new Cold War, characterised by closed borders and ongoing tension with Russia and Belarus. Border regions bear the highest economic, military, and hybrid costs of the current situation and need concrete EU support and solidarity. The conflict also creates internal social tensions, especially in areas with Russian-speaking minorities, forcing local authorities to balance security needs with minority rights and social cohesion. Moreover, in many European countries, populists use fear as a political tool, creating a disconnect between the EU and its citizens.

The *Arkadia* scenario (abbreviated):

> *Geopolitical instability in the mid-2020s prompted the EU to integrate its policy and defence rapidly. This led to a significant expansion, including Canada, a rejoined United Kingdom, a Balkan Confederation, Ukraine, and Turkey, with the EU budget reaching 15% of member states' GDP. Scientific breakthroughs made cold fusion a reality, and renewable energy sources became the standard. Artificial intelligence was effectively integrated into the global industry through regulations. The EU model, based on open borders and partnership, is emulated worldwide, ushering in an era of international peace with no armed conflicts for five years. The EU is a world leader in clean energy and the orange economy. Cross-border cooperation is now integrated into all policies, making programs like Interreg obsolete* (link to the full document).

The discussions on the Arkadia scenario concluded that it illustrates a utopian model of an open and successful Europe, but stressed that, in reality, it relies on fragile trust that can be easily shattered by top-down border closures during crises (e.g., COVID-19). Central decisions made without consultation

destroy trust[1]. For integration to be authentic and lasting, it must be a bottom-up process that grants border regions genuine autonomy over decisions that affect their residents' daily lives. European integration does not eliminate the desire to preserve cultural identity, which may drive CBC and EU integration in some CB areas. Borders, even symbolic or internal ones (e.g., Belgium), remain essential for protecting this identity, especially for national and ethnic minorities. A prosperous and integrated Europe attracts new member states by offering proven programs, such as Interreg and Erasmus, as key tools to facilitate their integration. Even with full integration, practical cross-border challenges, such as spatial planning and market imperfections, persist due to local obstacles. Therefore, programmes like Interreg remain necessary to facilitate ongoing coordination and social cohesion. Moreover, open borders create security challenges. Schengen shows that eliminating controls requires stronger cross-border police and security cooperation to combat crime and ensure adequate citizen security. A mandatory cross-border check for new laws helps build cohesion. Germany's model of consulting border stakeholders is an effective way to prevent the creation of unintentional new barriers.



Conclusions on the Fortress scenario

Conclusion 1

There is a constant tension between the long-standing concept of an open Europe without borders and the emerging necessity of a closed Europe focused on security, including the idea of a Defence Union. This is a highly dynamic conflict, vulnerable and influenced by a temporary geopolitical situation.

The current political focus on strengthening the Defence Union, while necessary, poses a significant risk of overshadowing or even dismantling the achievements made in citizen-level, grassroots cross-border cooperation.

Perspectives on European borders and integration can be characterised as follows:

- ***historically-dependent***, considering former disputes, wars and military tensions between nations and societies, including national and ethnic minorities and the historical background of cross-border relations;
- ***generation-dependent***, with a potential divide between those who remember a divided continent and the Schengen and Erasmus generation born into a borderless Europe;
- ***location-dependent***, with a potential divide between EU regions bordering Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, facing a direct military threat and those with a (still?) unrealistic sense of war;
- ***territorial development-dependent***, with a potential divide between vibrant EU regions characterised by intensive cross-border flows, increasing GDP and demography, and a high level of cross-border cooperation, and those which are backwards and peripheral regions, struggling with negative perspectives of economic development and depopulation undermining their long-term viability and resilience

[1] According to the recently amended Schengen code (Art. 42b), Schengen Area Member States had to identify cross-border regions and inform the European Commission accordingly by 11 January 2025. The Commission published the list of border regions by country in August, which included notable gaps and missing information, and received comments, particularly from AEBR, MOT, and CESCI. The lists have been compiled at the national level, defining border regions according to national nomenclatures rather than accounting for the cross-border functionality of some areas. In addition to the European principle of free movement, the territory of cross-border regions should be exempt from travel restrictions during emergencies, such as a pandemic, to maintain cross-border commuting and essential services in border areas.

Conclusion 2

When analysing parts of the scenario as analogous to the situation in Eastern Europe (e.g. eastern Finland, Baltic states, Poland), the following conclusions can be drawn:

- ***The historical context strongly influences border relations***. Attitudes and policies in EU regions bordering Russia are not uniform; their unique histories profoundly shape them. Some regions, like Finnish Karelia, have a legacy of positive, people-to-people cooperation. In contrast, others, like Estonia, have a relationship defined by a long-standing perception of threat rooted in past occupation.
- ***The Russian aggression in Ukraine has frozen, but not erased, different regional outlooks***. The military situation has halted cross-border activities in some areas, but it has not led to a single, unified response. Instead, it has reinforced pre-existing dispositions: regions with a history of cooperation hope for relations to resume, while those with a history of mistrust have deepened their isolation.
- ***These border regions face a dilemma***, which is revealed in two analysed, mutually exclusive trajectories: Either hoping for a normalisation and return to regular cross-border cooperation as it had existed before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or the "Fortress Europe" approach to securitise the border region against a permanent threat of hybrid and direct warfare.

Conclusion 3

When focusing only on the EU regions bordering Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, one can see that perceptions of military threat are diverse and context-dependent. Feelings about the threat from Russia are not uniform: the Baltic countries fear it much more than Poland or Finland. This perception is influenced by factors such as:

- ***history*** (e.g. the memory of the Soviet period in Estonia),
- ***geography*** (e.g. the proximity of the Suwałki Gap, the PL-LT border is the shortest land route between Kaliningrad and Belarus),
- the presence of ***allied forces***, e.g., the US Army.

Conclusion 4

Many border actors observe that the EU conflict with Russia is already underway, but it is mainly hybrid in nature. Even without open warfare, the Baltic Sea regions are already experiencing the real effects of the conflict. This includes cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, GPS signal disruptions, and acts of economic sabotage, such as the damage to the cable between Estonia and Finland. Given Russia's policy of confrontation with the EU, the future can be viewed as a state of tension between war and peace. The long-term outlook for Europe is one of permanent alert and tension in relations with Russia and Belarus. This means closed borders and a situation reminiscent of a new Cold War.

Conclusion 5

Currently, the sense of threat is a political tool, primarily used by populists. In some border regions, there is a disconnect between ordinary residents' perceptions of threat and politicians' narratives. Some politicians deliberately create and amplify the sense of threat because it fuels their political strategies. Border regions bear the highest costs of the current situation. They are victims across the economic (closed borders), military (perceived threat), and hybrid (cyberattacks) dimensions. They face this situation and need solidarity, as well as a concrete offer of support from the EU.

The conflict in Ukraine also generates internal tensions within EU member states. The situation on the eastern border creates significant social challenges, particularly in regions with a significant Russian-speaking minority (such as Estonia, Karelia, and the Suwałki Gap, which borders the Kaliningrad zone). Local authorities face the difficult task of balancing security issues with minority rights and maintaining social cohesion.

Conclusions on the Arkadia scenario

Conclusion 1

The Arkadia scenario presents a fully open, cooperative Europe based on deep mutual trust, but it is also extremely fragile, according to most participants in the workshop. As crises have shown (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic and the migrant crisis), the natural and rapid response to a threatening situation is to close borders. This shows that trust is the Arkadia model's greatest strength and greatest weakness.

One-sided, unconsulted decisions made at the central level during the COVID-19 pandemic are a fundamental contradiction of the spirit of European integration. The current example of the temporary reintroduction of border controls by Germany and Poland (2025) shows how actions by central governments, taken without regard for local flows and without consultation, undermine the trust that underpins the entire integrated system.

Lasting integration requires the real application of the principles of partnership, subsidiarity, and autonomy. For integration to be an authentic process accepted by citizens, it cannot be imposed from above. Border regions must have a degree of autonomy in decision-making that directly affects their functioning and the daily lives of their residents.

Conclusion 2

The model of a prosperous and integrated Europe, as presented in the Arkadia scenario, can attract new members (other states) who expect support, including access to proven and effective programs, such as Interreg and Erasmus, as key tools to facilitate their integration.

Conclusion 3

Advanced or full integration does not eliminate the practical challenges of cross-border cooperation, such as cross-border spatial planning, which will remain significant for regional authorities, necessitating ongoing coordination and integration of administrative actions. Other examples are the imperfect functioning of a common market and insufficient social cohesion at the local level. It is due to numerous individual obstacles and circumstances at the borders. Therefore, the Interreg programme is still necessary.

Conclusion 4

Open borders do not entail only positive effects; they also pose security challenges, so they cannot be viewed idealistically. The Schengen experience shows that eliminating border controls requires stronger cross-border cooperation among police and other services to combat crime and effectively meet citizens' expectations for security.

Conclusion 5

The integration does not eliminate the need to preserve cultural identity; therefore, one should assume that citizens still want to maintain their cultural identity, which borders (even symbolic ones) help protect. This issue is critical in areas where national and ethnic minorities live and where identity is based on interpersonal relationships. There are also internal borders in some countries (e.g., Belgium) that should be considered in terms of European integration.

Conclusion 6

An example of a mechanism for achieving cohesion is the introduction of a mandatory cross-border check for new legal regulations. The German government's positive example, which has introduced several measures to support local stakeholders at the borders and to monitor the impact of new legislation on CBC, demonstrates an effective way for nation-states to prevent the unintentional creation of new barriers.

Policy recommendations for Times of Trouble: What to do in 2035 of open borders and a deeper integrated Europe

Recommendation 1

Integrate cross-border cooperation into EU security policy, meaning that when developing EU defence initiatives, policymakers must create mechanisms to protect and sustain existing cross-border cooperation, where feasible and desired by local actors.

Recommendation 2

Implement targeted investments in the EU's peripheral regions, including programmes dedicated to combat the feeling of peripherality. This still requires significant investment to create high-quality economic opportunities, robust public services, and digital infrastructure, making these regions attractive places to live and work.

Recommendation 3

Create incentives to address depopulation in some EU borderlands by offering younger residents opportunities to stay in or return to these regions, providing tangible reasons to build their futures there while respecting their freedom of movement.

Recommendation 4

Create support packages and specific programmes for the EU border regions bordering Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. This assistance must be tailored to support economic diversification in border regions and help them offset losses from the closure of borders, reducing their dependence on relations with Russia and Belarus. This is crucial to prevent their degradation and depopulation.

Recommendation 5

Strengthen resilience to hybrid threats, including investments in cybersecurity, the protection of critical infrastructure (energy, communication), and technologies to cope with GPS signal disruptions and different types of drones.

Recommendation 6

Support for social cohesion in multi-ethnic regions, in managing social tensions, promoting dialogue, and protecting minority rights, so that they do not become tools of hostile disinformation.

Recommendation 7

Develop a reliable communication strategy for the EU and national levels that conducts transparent, fact-based communication about real threats and, through this, builds societal resilience to disinformation and counters the use of fear by populist politicians for their own purposes.

Recommendation targets:

Policy makers at the EU, national, regional and local levels, particularly those responsible for sustainable development of the EU border regions and territorial cooperation, as well as cohesion policy, cohesion and regional development, defence policy, communication and minorities rights.

Policy recommendations for Times of Togetherness: What to do in 2035 of open borders and a deeper integrated Europe

Recommendation 1

The Interreg and Erasmus programs should remain primary tools for further EU enlargement. They can both serve as the primary, proven mechanism for integration for countries and territories aspiring to join the EU, according to the Arkadia scenario.

Recommendation 2

It is essential to develop standard tools for practical cross-border cooperation, including common legal and administrative frameworks to facilitate the resolution of specific problems, such as spatial planning or the sharing of public services in the borderlands.

Recommendation 3

A mandatory framework for cross-border checks of new regulations and laws affecting cross-border cooperation should be established at the EU level. Every draft of a significant regulation, at both national and EU levels, should be subject to an impact assessment on border regions and to mandatory consultations with Euroregions and local partners. The German model should become a European standard.

Recommendation 4

A change in perspective at the national level is needed so that cross-border cooperation is viewed not as a local issue but as a strategic interest of the entire state. Education, funding systems, and national development strategies should include this dimension as a key to ensuring balanced territorial development and national cohesion, not just in the peripheries.

Recommendation 5

The role of local and regional actors should be strengthened by granting border regions greater autonomy in cross-border cooperation. This should include establishing formal mechanisms to prevent central governments from making unilateral, unconsulted decisions that negatively affect border communities.

Recommendation 6

Actively support a diversity policy as a part of the EU integration policy and consciously finance initiatives that protect cultural heritage, minority languages, and regional identities to communicate that European integration strengthens, rather than weakens, local cultures.

Recommendation 7

Intensify police and judicial cooperation, including the control of migration flows, as a condition for the complete opening of all borders, also those that have reintroduced border controls, e.g., Germany. The solution could be to invest in integrated European systems of police cooperation, shared databases, operational teams, and harmonised laws, which are essential for maintaining security in a borderless Europe.

Recommendation 8

A European supranational crisis-response mechanism to counteract border closures (health, economic, migration, etc.) should be developed. Such a mechanism would allow for a coordinated response without undermining the foundations of the Arkadia scenario, namely, freedom of movement and trust.

Recommended target groups:

Policy makers at the EU, national, regional and local levels, including Euroregions, EGTCs, Local Action Groups, INTERREG project partners, and other entities cooperating across borders.

Project Information:

- Project Beneficiaries: University of Southern Denmark, Denmark; Brunel University London, UK; European Academy Bozen, Italy; Oulu University, Finland; Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary; Technical University of Liberec, Czechia; University of Wrocław, Poland; Université de Strasbourg, France; The National Museum of History, Bulgaria; The Association of European Border Regions, Germany; The Foundation Network of European Remembrance and Solidarity, Poland; Kreatus, Poland; Lungomare Art Collective, Italy, Halmstad University, Sweden

- Duration: April 2023 – March 2026 (36 months)

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