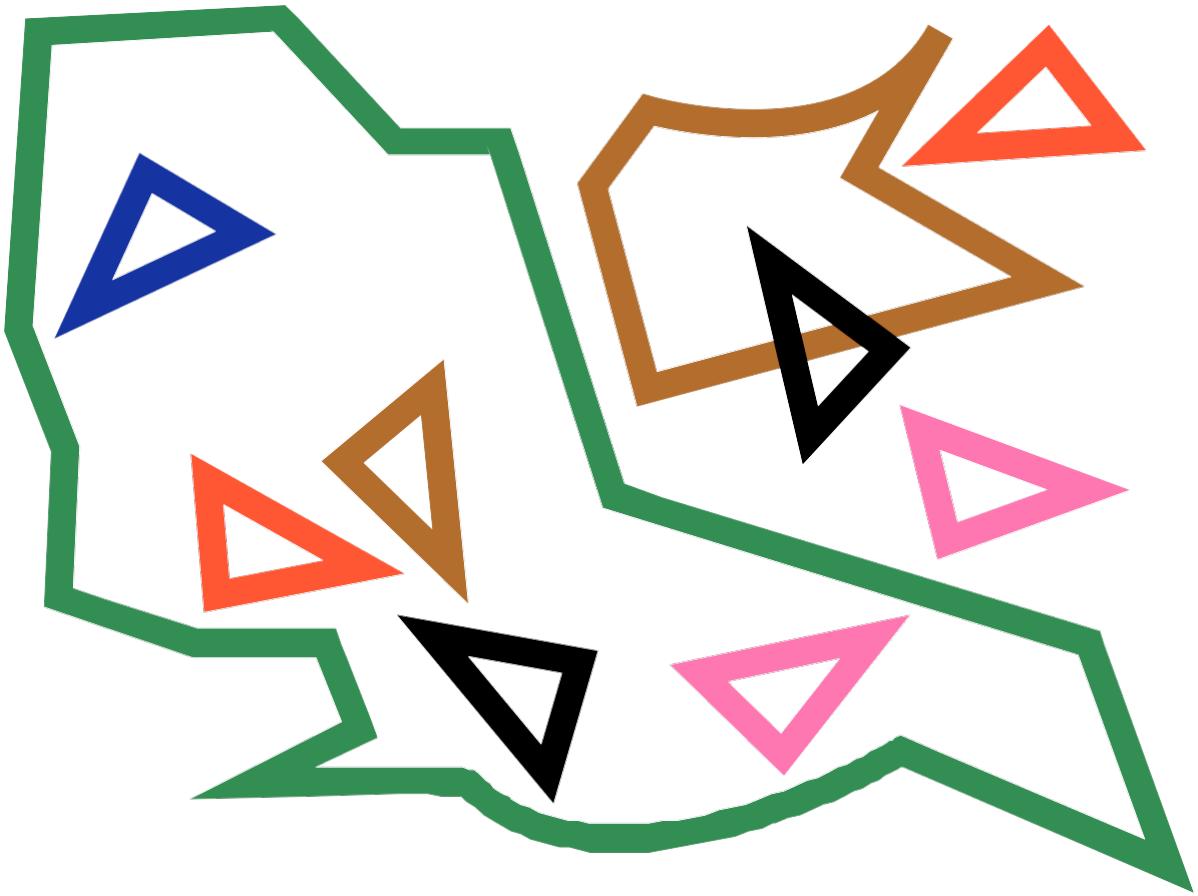
Policy Brief # 8

Cross-border Cooperation for Border Heritage Management

B-SHAPES - Borders shaping perceptions of European Societies



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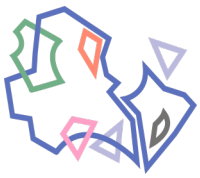
Executive summary

Heritage, which transcends national borders, can build the identity of neighbouring communities and simultaneously offer potential for economic development in these areas. To leverage the potential of borderland heritage, cross-border cooperation is required as a specific tool to mitigate numerous barriers and diverse narratives and perspectives affecting cross-border interactions, and to ensure the active participation of local actors, including minorities.

This Policy Brief, published within the B-SHAPES Policy Brief series, aims at presenting useful findings and advice on the effective management of borderland heritage through cross-border cooperation. They were developed based on the practical experience of Kreatus Ltd., a company specialising in cross-border project management, and expanded upon within the B-SHAPES project. The analysis also incorporates outcomes from two policy seminars on the Swedish-Danish and Swedish-Finnish borders, as well as a winter school at the University of Halmstad, during which local stakeholders were consulted on the preliminary conclusions and recommendations prepared by Kreatus Ltd for developing this document.

The analyses and consultations carried out enabled the formulation of 10 conclusions and 11 recommendations regarding the use of cross-border cooperation in managing the borderland heritage. They can be useful to both scientists and practitioners, particularly those directly engaged in borderland heritage management through cross-border projects and other initiatives.

Context.



Heritage doesn't disappear at the borders between countries and regions. Rather, it embodies the cross-border transfer of values that connect communities, historical narratives, and local identities, building a sense of togetherness and providing assets for the joint shaping, protection, and sustainable use of borderland landscapes.

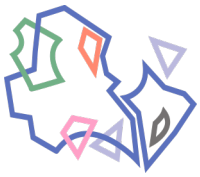
Spatial continuity bridging neighbouring communities through cultural and natural heritage is often disrupted by administrative divisions and other barriers, such as linguistic, financial, and political ones. Cross-border cooperation can overcome these barriers, making the management of borderland heritage a collaborative process based on a shared vision, goals, and common interests.

Managing the heritage of borderlands enables the identification and appreciation of resources that are of particular significance to neighbouring communities, and it often facilitates cross-border dialogue, confronting difficult historical pasts and transforming potential tensions into opportunities to build mutual trust. This supports the development of a shared, unifying perception of heritage that promotes the European value of diversity over historical divisions.

Incorporating the principle of participation into heritage management, with due recognition for national and ethnic minorities, as well as providing a place-based and resource-based approach, allows for the holistic management of the cultural and natural environment and prioritizing the genius loci and the voice of local actors, who should be treated as the most important stakeholders in this process.

Without cross-border cooperation, heritage management remains confined within state-national structures, preventing neighbouring communities from collectively capitalising on the historical, cultural, and natural assets they share. Only cross-border cooperation ensures that borderland heritage ceases to be merely a tourist attraction exploited in an uncoordinated manner and becomes a key asset for building a cohesive identity, social integration, and a sense of European community. Therefore, borderland heritage management aims to empower local communities, including minorities and youth, to act as drivers of the sustainable maintenance and development of borderland heritage, moving them from the symbolic periphery of this discourse directly to the centre of European Union policymaking.

The B-SHAPES research offers insights into how diverse interests and values regarding natural and cultural landscapes are manifested in both formal, institutionalised, and everyday, common heritage narratives in European borderlands. It also provides findings on how borderland heritage should be managed operationally to sustainably utilise heritage assets in social, economic, and environmental terms. It responds to the need to place greater focus on cross-border dimensions in national, regional, and local heritage perceptions, practices, and policies.



Evidence, Analysis, and Results

This policy brief is based on three sources. The first source of information is the experience and best practices of Kreatus Ltd., a partner in the B-SHAPES project of which the two authors of this Brief are the founders and owners. Kreatus Ltd. specialises in cross-border governance, particularly in developing cross-border policies and strategies, conducting cross-border participatory activities, defining cross-border functional areas that incorporate borderland heritage, and evaluating cross-border projects in tourism, culture, and environmental protection. Kreatus Ltd. implemented such activities in recent years on the Polish-Slovak, Polish-Czech, Polish-German, and Polish-Lithuanian borderlands.

Through active participation in the 3-year-long research project B-SHAPES, Kreatus Ltd has contributed perspectives grounded in practical feasibility and practitioners' needs, and, in return, has gained insights from broader European geographies. This Policy Brief summarises Kreatus Ltd.'s position on cross-border cultural heritage.

In addition to the experiences and best practices of Kreatus Ltd, the Policy Brief draws on B-SHAPES policy seminars that synthesise practitioner knowledge in two distinct but interconnected areas: the sparsely populated Finnish-Swedish border region and the urbanised Swedish-Danish Öresund region. Kreatus Ltd. participated in these workshops, recorded discussions (after obtaining informed consent) and has placed these insights into comparison with continental Europe.

In both regions of the two policy seminars, borderland heritage is of vital interest to local communities and a variety of cross-border heritage-related activities, both infrastructural and soft, are being carried out, both within and outside Interreg-funded projects. The policy workshops were conducted in Copenhagen, Denmark, on November 3, 2025, and in Tornio, Finland, on December 9, 2025.

The purpose of the workshops was to gather the opinions of local actors and to provide conclusions on how cross-border cooperation can contribute to the effective management of border heritage. The target groups of these workshops were, among others:

- Representatives of local government units (councillors, governors, and employees of these units responsible for cross-border cooperation and heritage management),
- Employees of cultural institutions, institutions dealing with regional and local development, nature conservation, and tourism development, as well as institutions cooperating with national and ethnic minorities,
- Owners, managers, operators and custodians of various types of heritage present on the borderlands
- Representatives of public, commercial and social entities providing heritage-based services,
- Representatives of Euroregions and European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation,
- Cross-border project partners,
- Social activists and representatives of non-governmental organizations,
- Representatives of national and ethnic minorities,
- Local opinion leaders.

Additionally, during the B-SHAPES Winter School on Culture, Landscape and Minorities taking place at Halmstad University in January 2026, preliminary conclusions and recommendations were discussed with several practitioners and researchers participating in the event.

Despite the investigated border regions having distinct geographic, cultural, and historical characteristics and differing border heritages, the findings point to analogies in how they perceive and act on cross-border cooperation for borderland heritage management.

Key findings

1. Currently, cross-border cooperation on heritage management in many border regions is primarily conducted within a variety of projects funded by the Interreg program, which mostly provide small-scale and very limited interventions. In areas where Interreg doesn't support cross-border cooperation on borderland heritage, other funding sources are used to develop projects, including international, national, and regional programs. Such cooperation can also be observed through territorial agreements, such as those within Euroregions, framework agreements between local governments (e.g. twin cities), and agreements between other entities (e.g. cultural institutions). Relatively rarely, cross-border cooperation on border heritage is highlighted in national and regional strategies and policies. This indicates a fragmented and uncoordinated approach to borderland heritage management and doesn't guarantee measurable and tangible results.
2. Since across European borderlands, the majority of projects devoted to borderland heritage are Interreg-based, cross-border cooperation in this regard primarily involves staff with

competencies in preparing project applications, managing cross-border projects and partnerships, and managing project accounting, reporting and settlements. Relatively few of this group also possess the knowledge and competencies necessary to manage border cultural or natural heritage, which is a separate issue. That is why such projects are not always implemented to a high standard and often fail to develop into long-term collaborations. In contrast, those dedicated to the protection and development of borderland cultural heritage and specialising in these issues often operate locally, lacking the expertise to raise funds to support their initiatives and lacking the resources to develop cross-border cooperation. There is a lack of individuals who combine the expertise to raise funds with the expertise to manage borderland heritage and develop cross-border cooperation in this area.

3. The richness and diversity of borderland heritage in many territories clash with limited resources and capacity to manage these assets at a sufficient level across borders. It is often difficult to encompass all heritage elements that warrant joint management. In many cases, the entities that have these resources at their disposal are not interested in cross-border cooperation or lack the resources. Faced with these challenges, stakeholders typically focus on selected elements of borderland heritage that they are most interested in and to which they have access.

4. The development of cross-border cooperation related to heritage, mostly in projects co-financed by the Interreg program, usually limits the target groups of stakeholders who can participate in such activities to entities eligible for funding. Cross-border cooperation on heritage most often involves public entities, such as local government units, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations, as well as the education sector. The commercial sector plays a very small role in these activities. Businesses often fail to understand how cross-border cooperation on border heritage can impact their businesses, for example, in the hospitality industry.

5. Due to their history and location, minorities live transnational lives. They possess bilingual and bicultural competencies that predispose them to serve as direct links between states and neighbouring communities. In borderland heritage management, minorities still often serve as passive objects of policies and strategies rather than active creators. A dissonance is discernible between the potential of minorities in borderlands and their real influence on decision-making processes. Minority perspectives are marginalised in favour of top-down, national narratives. Even in borderlands, minorities are insufficiently involved in the development and implementation of cultural heritage management plans. This represents a systemic waste of social capital unless decision-makers shift to a fully participatory approach.

6. Mutual prejudices and animosities, resulting from stereotypical perceptions of neighbours, historical events, and differing interpretations of certain past events, remain real obstacles to the development of cross-border cooperation in heritage management. Effective management of borderland heritage fails when a shared narrative and understanding of the past are lacking. The lack of social understanding leads to a negative perception of mutual relations in the present and hinders the development of trust, which underpins cross-border cooperation across all fields.

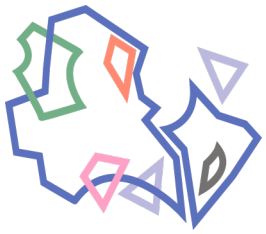
7. Most cross-border heritage projects are oriented towards tourism, which results in a prioritisation of the economic dimension of heritage (e.g., job creation and profit generation) over aspects such as inclusiveness, interculturality, dialogue, and the shaping of a European identity or sense of belonging. The economic aspect should become crucial, but also stimulate social interactions and partnerships, and enhance the territories.

8. Information asymmetry and varying access to data pose challenges for managing borderland heritage in cross-border cooperation. Incompatibility between statistical systems, such as

separate registers of monuments, and the lack of unified, integrated databases undermine the possibility of reliable planning

9. Legal differences regarding heritage protection, such as conservation and environmental protection, hinder cross-border cooperation in managing these resources. In particular, they complicate planning the scope and approach to heritage management, and may even exclude certain heritage elements from these activities.

10. Numerous attempts are being made to develop policies and strategies for managing various types of borderland heritage, including historical, cultural, natural, tangible, and intangible. A common feature of many of these initiatives is that they are developed by a very narrow group of participants, without a participatory approach, and sometimes even independently by an external contractor, such as a consulting firm. While the developed documents are accepted and have their administrators (e.g., local governments), they remain declarative and are not implemented. Often, there is a lack of real motivation, capacity, and resources to implement them. Consequently, many valuable initiatives fail to lead to a real change in the approach to the exploitation of the borderland heritage.



Policy Recommendations

1. Future-oriented cross-border cooperation in borderland heritage management requires a ***shift from a project-based (periodic) to a relation-based (long-term) approach***, and from building ad hoc alliances to building stable networks of stakeholders who cooperate across projects, partnerships, and borders toward a common goal.

2. Shared management of borderland heritage should be based on ***symmetrical and comparable involvement of partners from both sides of the border***, specifically various local actors, including minorities, but first of all decision-makers and other entities e.g. Euroregions, EGTCs etc. who demonstrate sufficient competencies and capacities for playing such roles and can take responsibility for supervising, implementing and funding such activities as well as coordinating cross-border cooperation of different stakeholders operating in this field on the both sides of the border.

3. Effective management of borderland heritage requires ***increasing the pool of specialists*** with knowledge and competencies in both the development of cross-border cooperation and expertise in implementing projects related to the protection, restoration, promotion, and sustainable use of borderland heritage, who are focused on building lasting cross-border relationships in this area.

4. Given budget deficits, a shortage of other resources, and limited stakeholder interest, it is necessary to ***focus solely on those heritage elements that can be effectively managed operationally in cross-border cooperation***, e.g., through a Euroregion, EGTC, or a specific territorial agreement, such as a cross-border Local Action Group. When selecting which heritage elements to focus on in cross-border cooperation, a hybrid approach should be adopted that combines resource-based and place-based approaches. This requires:
    a. capitalising on available assets (***resource-based approach***), i.e., selecting only available assets and transforming them into a shared, marketable product, e.g., tourism, cultural, or recreational (e.g., a trail). This also generates tangible socio-economic benefits and makes involved stakeholders beneficiaries of this intervention;
    b. filtering through genius loci (***place-based approach***), i.e., including mainly resources (potential, values, assets) directly related to the local narratives and perceptions as well as environmental and social conditions of the borderland.
5. To develop sustainable cross-border cooperation related to heritage, it is necessary to further ***diversify the stakeholders involved*** (emphasis on the greater involvement of SMEs and other enterprises) and financing sources (moving away from the Interreg program as the main sponsor of these activities and increasing the role of private capital). This requires educating the business sector about what cross-border cooperation entails and how it can be linked to the use of borderland heritage. This can be achieved by promoting good practices from European borderlands. Involving businesses in cross-border heritage management will ensure not only social and environmental benefits but also economic ones. Building mutual trust between neighbouring communities, including businesses, is crucial, allowing competition to gradually transform into cooperation.
6. Developing cross-border documents regarding joint heritage management requires the application of the ***principle of participation***, among others, such as cross-border public consultation, with a higher ***emphasis on the minority representatives***. Considering the cultural autonomy of minorities in cross-border cooperation can help strengthen cross-border relations and incorporate their perspectives into heritage management.
7. Cross-border cooperation planning in heritage management should begin with an ***open and participatory dialogue*** between neighbouring communities, in which differing perspectives are treated with respect. This approach should primarily address historical heritage, which can be a source of many prejudices and animosities that hinder cross-border cooperation in this area. To develop cooperation, it is necessary to create shared narratives and an understanding of the past that does not burden current cross-border relations.
8. Greater attention should be paid to the ***sustainable use of heritage***, without compromising its economic potential, to ensure that such projects also adequately incorporate social aspects, such as inclusiveness, interculturality, and dialogue with local actors (e.g., regenerative tourism, slow tourism, etc.), as well as fostering a European identity or sense of belonging. The economic aspect should be key, but it should also stimulate social interactions and partnerships and enrich the territories.
9. To minimise the challenges associated with information asymmetry and varying access to data, which hinders joint heritage management on both sides of the border, cross-border

cooperation should be initiated to implement an ***integrated, bilingual data exchange protocol*** within the cooperation area, for example, within a Euroregion. This will allow equal access to information for heritage managers and shorten the time required to obtain investment approvals.

10. The creation of a ***permanent cross-border task force*** integrating the dispersed structures of conservation protection carried out by officials and specialised agencies will help maintain cross-border dialogue and overcome discrepancies, for example, in spatial planning, which constitute difficulties in heritage management in the border region.
11. The design of a border heritage management plan in a cross-border cooperation should be a ***bottom-up effort***, initiated by leaders designated to coordinate the process on both sides of the border, who have sufficient human, institutional, and financial resources at their disposal. They are responsible for conducting an inclusive process to outline a border heritage management plan with SMART objectives that align with stakeholder expectations, and for its implementation. To this end, the process should be based on cross-border leadership and long-term cooperation among leading parties that advance the relevant interests and contributions of other stakeholders.

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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, Hogskolan Halmstad, Sweden

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

- Internet presence:

Website: https://www.sdu.dk/en/forskning/forskningsenheder/samf/b-shapes ,
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13019005/,
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/people/B-Shapes/100092507586694/,
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