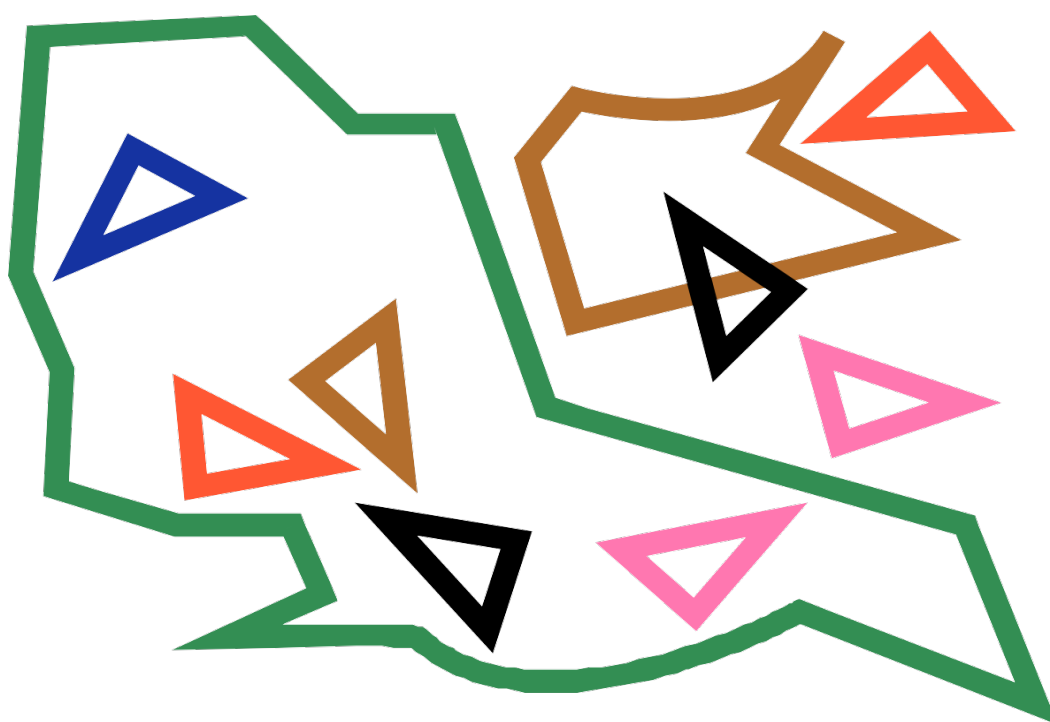


Policy Brief #9

# Leaving no-one behind in research policy

B-Shapes - Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies



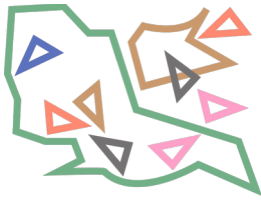
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## Executive Summary

Research policy, including EU research policy, treats diversity and inclusion as integral to research quality, with a particular emphasis on gender equality. This approach rests on the assumption that social identities and cleavages shape the lived experience and, therefore, research outcomes. While this has clear merits, it risks privileging predefined categories at the expense of context-specific forms of difference and belonging. The B-SHAPES project starts from the premise that in border regions, identities and experiences are shaped not only by predefined social categories but also by spatial and relational factors that derive from everyday border practices.

This Policy Brief is based on media analyses and fieldwork, including interviews, focus groups, workshops and border walks, conducted with borderland populations at ten European borders. All analyses addressed how the border regional context shapes perceptions of European integration. Reflecting on the research process, we found that achieving gender-balanced participation is often constrained by the structure of the studied populations and by institutional and data-related barriers. While targeted recruitment and careful reporting practices can mitigate some imbalances, the project found no systematic gender-based differences in how borders and Europe were narrated. More broadly, B-SHAPES demonstrates that borderland identities frequently cut across standard demographic categories. Narrative and arts-based methods allowed participants to articulate their own positionalities, revealing perspectives often absent from media, heritage and policy narratives. At the same time, access to certain groups remains structurally limited, risking the reproduction of existing exclusions.

Based on these findings, this Policy Brief recommends that research policy move beyond a narrow focus on predefined social cleavages. Funders should allow applicants to justify which identities and distinctions are locally salient, support narrative and participatory methods, and recognise cross-border contexts as sites of inquiry in their own right rather than merely binational settings. Evaluation criteria should acknowledge structural access barriers and avoid penalising researchers for constraints beyond their control. Finally, future funding calls should explicitly address remaining knowledge gaps by inviting bottom-up research on hard-to-reach borderland populations and by encouraging context-sensitive approaches that better reflect how belonging and identity are experienced in Europe's border regions.

## Context



The European Commission, and many other research organisations and funders, view diversity and inclusion as integral to research quality.<sup>1</sup> The Commission especially promotes gender equality in research and innovation by promoting balanced participation, the use of Gender Equality Plans, and the integration of gender analysis into research content.<sup>2</sup> This means systematically accounting for sex and gender differences - and how these intersect with other social categories - in research design, methods, analysis and reporting, to enhance scientific quality and societal relevance.<sup>3</sup>

Implicit in this framework are concerns with how social identities and cleavages shape the lived experience and, therefore, research outcomes. Yet, this focus also risks narrowing the attention to predefined categories at the expense of other, context-specific forms of difference and belonging. The approach applied in the B-Shapes research project emphasises the need to voice alternative narratives when understanding the impacts of state borders, and ultimately how European integration is perceived in the light of these borders. Rather than tying individuals to categories that are supposed to sum up their opinions and identities, our approach shows how narratives travel across these categories to create common understandings and group belonging. At the same time, we challenge and expand taken-for-granted social identity categories. We understand it as essential to apply such an approach if the intention is to produce inclusive and encompassing research.



## Evidence, Analysis, and Results

The B-shapes project conducted media analyses and fieldwork, including interviews, focus groups, workshops and border walks, among borderland populations at ten borders. Across this empirical work achieving gender-balanced representation in data collection proved difficult, largely because imbalances reflected the structure of the populations from which we drew our samples.

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<sup>1</sup> Science Europe (2024) *Practical Guide to Supporting Diversity in Research Environments*, available at [202402\\_practical\\_guide\\_to\\_diversity.pdf](#) (accessed 1 December 2025); UKRI (2023) 'UKRI's equality, diversity and inclusion strategy: research and innovation by everyone, for everyone', available at [UKRI's equality, diversity and inclusion strategy: research and innovation by everyone, for everyone – UKRI](#) (accessed 1 December 2025)

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (n.d.) 'Gender equality in research and innovation', available at [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/democracy-and-rights/gender-equality-research-and-innovation\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/democracy-and-rights/gender-equality-research-and-innovation_en) (accessed 11 November 2025).

<sup>3</sup> *Gendered innovations 2 – How inclusive analysis contributes to research and innovation – Policy review*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/316197>

For example, the narratives that we derived from media analyses in different settings relied predominantly on interviews and statements by politicians and economic lobbyists from male-dominated sectors, something beyond the research team's control. Equally, the absence of female interviewees from radical-right parties<sup>4</sup> politician interviews reflects the well-documented male bias in such parties' membership and leadership. Recruitment for workshops, focus groups and border walks aimed at a more equal representation, but the involvement of third organisations in recruitment, as well as differences in who volunteered as participants, meant that a perfect balance was not always achievable. Shaped by the local border context, such imbalances potentially influenced the types of stories told. Representation must also extend to analysis and reporting: gender balance in samples is insufficient if findings reproduce one-sided narratives. Thus, we created coding categories to ensure adequate gender representation in our reporting. Importantly, our analysis did not reveal any gender-based differences in how politicians and participants narrated borders or Europe.

In keeping with our commitment to amplifying under-represented voices, B-SHAPES centres borderlanders as a marginalised group in European policy debates and integrates perspectives that are peripheral, cross-border and often absent from dominant narratives. Our empirical work prioritised listening to lived experience and allowed participants to articulate their own positionalities rather than assigning labels from above. We did not exclude radical-right voices, and sought to reflect the diversity of views present in each region. Arts-based activities organised by Lungomare reinforced this approach: these workshops brought together participants from both sides of a border and invited them to explore what 'cross-borderness' meant in their own terms. Rather than categorising people by nationality or citizenship, the activities created space for participants to define their own forms of belonging through practice and place. This supported our broader aim of opening space for narratives that emerge from lived experience rather than from predefined identity labels.

The project's narrative approach gives voice to varied perspectives without relying on predefined identity categories. Rather than tying individuals to fixed labels, we trace how narratives travel across categories to create shared understandings and forms of belonging, while also challenging taken-for-granted social cleavages. For example, our analysis shows that heritage narratives in border regions are shaped by strong institutional conventions, with the national scale dominating. This 'national container' problem limits cross-border, regional, minority and personalised stories. B-SHAPES has opened up space for alternative narratives told by residents, revealing how borderland heritage and identity are experienced beyond official accounts. These findings highlight the value of a narrative, context-sensitive approach.

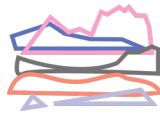
However, access to certain perspectives from outside the European Union was limited by structural constraints and data-related barriers. It also proved difficult to gain access to so-called 'vulnerable populations', a common challenge in qualitative research. These constraints create exclusions and bias in the way issues are portrayed and discussed in research and underline the need for flexible, context-sensitive methods capable of engaging overlooked communities.

While EU research frameworks rightly emphasise gender and other social cleavages, the border context suggests that spatial and relational identities can override these distinctions. An entirely bottom-up, category-free approach is unrealistic, but in settings where marginalisation is already defined by place, adding too many pre-defined identities may obscure the dynamics we seek to

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<sup>4</sup> Mudde, Cas (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.10.1017/CBO9780511492037

understand. A more context-sensitive approach to inclusion is therefore needed and should be reflected in funding criteria. Further research should examine how different axes of belonging interact in border regions.



### Policy Recommendations.

- **Move beyond a narrow focus on predefined social cleavages** in research: research funders (including Horizon Europe) should explicitly allow for place- and practice-based framings alongside standard categories such as gender, age, disability or citizenship, and encourage research practices that move beyond rigid labels towards inclusive, context-sensitive language reflecting the fluid identities and diverse experiences of individuals.
  - In calls and evaluation criteria, invite applicants to justify *which* cleavages are salient, rather than stipulating a fixed list.
  - Encourage the use of narrative and participatory methods that let participants define their own positionalities.
- **Strengthen inclusive, context-sensitive participation methods:** structural barriers such as data protection, institutional gatekeepers and difficulties engaging ‘hard-to-reach’ groups limit access to certain perspectives and risk reproducing existing exclusions in social research and policy debates. Border regions illustrate these challenges. Policy-makers and funders should therefore treat inclusive, flexible recruitment and narrative methods as core quality criteria in border-related research (as well as potentially in the social sciences more broadly), consultations and pilot projects, and move beyond strictly national or binational framings by recognising cross-border contexts as sites of inquiry in their own right.
  - Acknowledge structural barriers in evaluation and reporting, ensuring that limited access to certain populations is not penalised when it stems from legal or institutional constraints rather than poor research design.
- **Address remaining knowledge gaps through context-sensitive, bottom-up research:** more contextualised work is needed to understand which identities matter in which settings, and how spatial and social cleavages interact in Europe’s border regions. We still know relatively little about how borderlanders who are not easily reachable, such as undocumented migrants or residents on the non-EU side of borders, experience European integration.
  - Explicitly invite projects that gather bottom-up borderland perspectives, using qualitative and narrative methods capable of accessing marginalised or hard-to-reach groups.
  - Allow applicants to justify and use context-sensitive identity framings, rather than forcing standard national or demographic labels, particularly in research involving cross-border communities or mobile populations.
- **Strengthen institutional capacity building for research funders and funding institutions:** to enable the recommendations above funders should and funding institutions need continued dialogue with researchers and, where appropriate, training. This would serve to deepen understanding of how structural, institutional barriers, conventional practices and assumptions can both enable and prevent inclusion and reflect realities. It would focus on how to respond to intersectional identities, place-specific dynamics, and how problem/intervention definition in programming and funding design can allow for and enable rather than constrain research in the interests of deepening understanding of both borderlands and minorities.

**Project Information:**

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

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/>

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

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