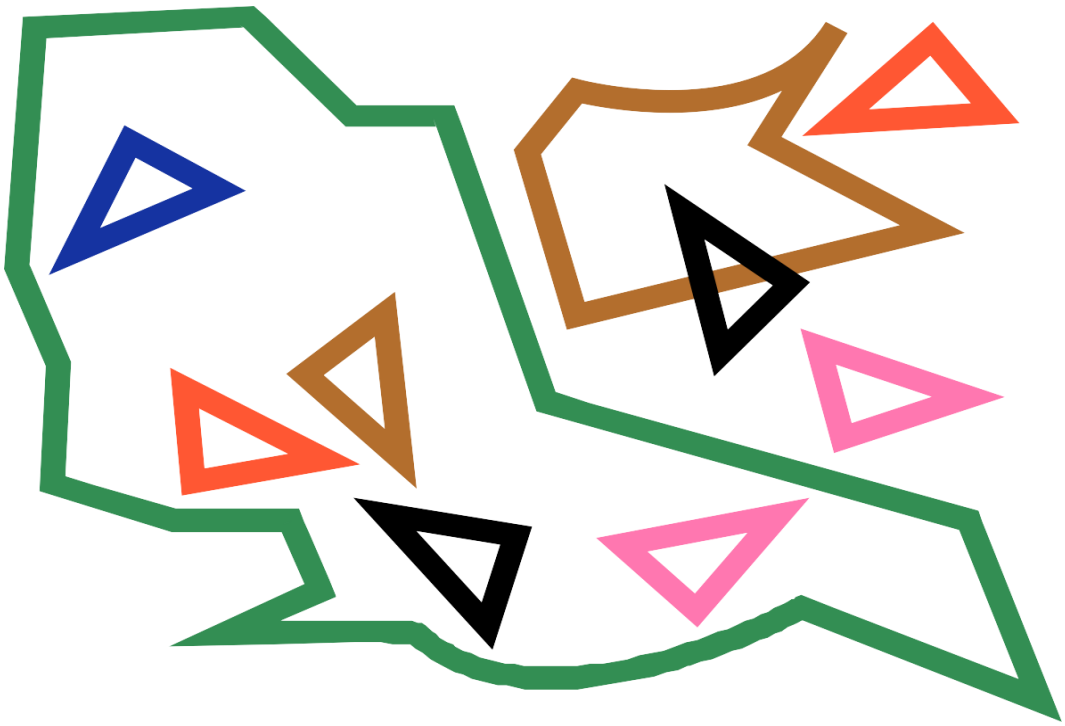
Policy Brief # 10

European Borderlands, Borders and Minorities

B-Shapes - Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies



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Executive Summary

Borders have regained political and symbolic prominence in Europe following the 2015-2016 migration crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, with significant implications for minority communities living in border regions. For minorities whose identities, languages, and social ties often span state borders, re-bordering events disrupt everyday life and challenge long-established cross-border practices.

Drawing on the B-SHAPES project's research across five European border regions (South Tyrol, Zaolzie/Těšín Silesia, North & South Schleswig, Southern Slovakia, and Western Thrace), this policy brief highlights how minority youth experience borders and the European Union and provides recommendations to EU policymakers and EU officials.

Analysis of minority media and fieldwork with young people shows a stark contrast in how borders and the EU are framed. While minority newspapers tend to portray borders through political or securitised lenses, young minority borderlanders view borders pragmatically as open, functional spaces facilitated by Schengen. For them, linguistic and cultural differences are often more salient "borders" than physical checkpoints. Crises like the pandemic, however, reveal the fragility of openness, reinforcing feelings of inequality, particularly among groups facing more restrictive mobility.

Young minority members across regions conceive of the EU primarily as a practical enabler of free movement, education, and opportunities rather than as an emotional community of belonging. Despite this instrumental view, they internalise European integration in their daily routines. At the same time, many express skepticism about the EU's consistency in protecting minority rights and perceive EU institutions as distant from their lived experiences. Their strong regional and minority identities shape cross-border imaginaries and contribute positively to local cohesion and cultural vitality.

The findings underline a key conclusion: minority communities are an asset to European border regions, and minority youth, embedded in multilingual, cross-cultural environments, embody the everyday reality of European integration. Yet their perspectives remain insufficiently represented in policymaking. Ensuring that EU policies address the vulnerabilities and potentials of borderland communities, particularly minorities, strengthening minority protection, and embedding youth and minority voices is essential for building a more inclusive and cohesive Europe.

Context

In recent years, Europe has seen a renewed emphasis on borders, especially during the so-called migration crisis in 2015/16 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. During this period, political, symbolic, and cultural boundaries have become more tangible and present in public discourse, affecting the movement of people and goods and the broader process of European integration. For minorities, understood here as people with common ethnic, linguistic and/or religious features and with historical ties to a specific geographical area, cross-border connections are vital to their daily lives and social fabric. Re-bordering events can, therefore, be especially challenging for them and are subject to intensive and often highly politicized debate.

Our research in the B-SHAPES project focuses on minorities in five European border regions to understand how young people in particular experience and perceive borders and the European Union in their everyday life:

- **South Tyrol** (Italy–Austria)
- **Zaolzie/Těšín Silesia** (Poland–Czechia)
- **North & South Schleswig** (Denmark–Germany)
- **Southern Slovakia** (Hungary–Slovakia)
- **Western Thrace** (Greece–Bulgaria–Türkiye)

In the first phase of the research, we studied media narratives surrounding borders and Europe through the analysis of over 1,700 border-related articles from six minority newspapers in Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Slovakia, focusing on the periods of increased migration in 2015-2016 and the border closures enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.[1] The second phase of research, conducted in 2024-2025, studied narratives about borders and Europe expressed by young persons belonging to borderland minorities. Besides semi-structured interviews and zine-making workshops, we also hosted policy seminars with minority stakeholders.

This policy brief addresses EU policy makers and officials, and draws on research findings as well as on expert knowledge and stakeholder experiences. Through the recommendations presented, we aim to give voice to, and shed light at, some of the key challenges faced by minorities living in European borderlands today.

Evidence, Analysis, and Results

Narratives on borders and Europe in minority newspapers differ substantially from those of young people from minority communities in European borderlands:

- Media outlets frame borders and Europe in politicized or securitized terms
- Young members of minorities are pragmatic and functional, focusing on the opportunities the EU offers for travel, study, work, and everyday convenience.

This divergence underscores that youth voices are often underrepresented in public narratives, despite their importance for the future of European integration.

Perceptions of Borders

Findings show that for most young people belonging to minorities in European borderlands, borders are experienced as opportunities rather than barriers, as open, largely invisible and easy to cross, thanks to Schengen. However, borders still matter in other ways:

- Language and cultural differences feel like the “real” borders
- Family histories and collective memory shapes imaginations of borders
- Crisis events like COVID-19 expose the fragility of border openness
- Comparing open internal borders to securitised external EU borders made young people aware of inequalities of the effects of borders on people. Border crossings are experienced with a feeling of uneasiness by Turkish minority youth.

[1] The findings of this work are documented here.

Perceptions of Europe and the EU

Young minority borderlanders see the EU mainly in practical terms rather than as a community of belonging. The EU is perceived as a taken-for-granted institution that guarantees free movement, programmes such as Erasmus+ exchange, and funding for regions, as well as minority protection. At the same time, the EU is also considered to be distant and unreliable, and some minority youth are skeptical about the EU's institutional commitment to minority rights.

Identities and belonging

Strong regional and minority identities of minority borderlanders transcend national divisions while affirming cultural distinctiveness.

Overall Study Conclusions

Our research shows that:

- Minority communities are an asset for borderlands. Their cross-border outlook and experience with different cultures should be acknowledged and should inform cross-border cooperation policies, not the least in the heritage industry
- Minority youth in border regions normalize and internalize European integration through their everyday practices
- Young minority borderlanders do not display a strong emotional attachment to the EU
- The inclusion of their voices is key to shaping inclusive visions of Europe's future.

Policy Recommendations

From a policy perspective, the study suggests three key implications.

1) EU policymakers and officials should acknowledge both the integration and vulnerability of borderlands, ensuring that re-bordering policies do not disproportionately harm minority communities.
2) 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.
3) Youth voices, particularly those of underrepresented groups such as minorities, should be actively integrated into policymaking processes through both formal and creative and participatory approaches. Youth should also be a key target of EU communication to enhance young people's identification with the EU.

Financial Support

<u>Give greater consideration to minorities in EU funding streams for border regions</u>
The European Union should ensure that existing funding programmes, such as Cohesion Policy funds, ESF+, Erasmus+, Creative Europe, and Interreg, explicitly support projects carried out by

minorities. Dedicated priority lines should be created or expanded to finance cultural, educational, and socio-economic initiatives led by minority organisations in border regions, focusing for instance on:

- the development of basic infrastructure for the protection and promotion of regional and minority languages (e.g. educational, cultural, and media infrastructure)
- cross-border cooperation among minority communities in border regions
- socio-economic development initiatives in traditional minority and border regions.

Improve access to EU funding and build capacity
The European Union should introduce measures that facilitate access to EU funding for minority organisations in borderlands including:

- simplified application and reporting procedures for smaller organisations
- tailored technical assistance for project design and implementation
- systematic outreach to minority communities through EU funding advisory structures.

Promote ethically-sensitive data collection and statistics on minority issues

The European Union should introduce an EU-wide system for data collection on minorities, strengthen research on minorities and minority languages and linguistic diversity, as well as institutionalise EU-level monitoring on minorities. To do so, the EU could:

- develop a European data collection instrument to gather voluntary, anonymous, and non-discriminatory information on minorities, inspired by existing surveys such as the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) and based on the principle of self-identification.
- regularly commission studies and reports on the situation of regional and minority languages (language vitality, education provision, media presence, digital visibility). This data should inform the design of EU programmes in education, culture, regional development, and digital transformation.
- establish a regular monitoring process, such as an "EU Minority Report", to assess the situation of minorities across Member States, complementing the Rule of Law Review Cycle and developed with RA, Eurostat, and bodies of the Council of Europe.

Institutional Support and Mainstreaming

Strengthen institutional capacity within the European Commission
The EU should create a permanent administrative structure responsible for coordinating minority-related issues and ensure that minority perspectives are systematically integrated into policy areas including cohesion policy, education, culture, and digital affairs. This includes:

- a dedicated unit/person within DG REGIO and DG HOME
- an inter-departmental coordination mechanism.

Mainstream minority perspectives in EU policy frameworks and documents
The EU should consistently reflect on the role of minorities in its territorial, regional, and cohesion policy frameworks and documents. This includes:

- integrating minority perspectives into Interreg and other territorial cooperation programmes

- ensuring their inclusion in Cohesion Policy Partnership Agreements
- referencing minority issues in EU strategic cohesion reports
- exploring synergies between minorities and cross-border regions

Expand EU-level educational and awareness-raising efforts

The EU should develop targeted training and information programmes for national and regional public authorities to improve understanding of minority rights, linguistic diversity, and border region dynamics. Possible measures include:

- training sessions for administrative staff
- information campaigns on the cultural and societal value of minority languages
- exchange and mobility programmes for public administrations in border regions.

Explore the establishment of EU-level structures dedicated to minority issues

In the long term, the EU should assess the feasibility of creating a specialised agency or competence centre focused on minority issues, linguistic diversity, and the collection of relevant expertise, and cooperating closely with the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and Council of Europe bodies.

Project Information:

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