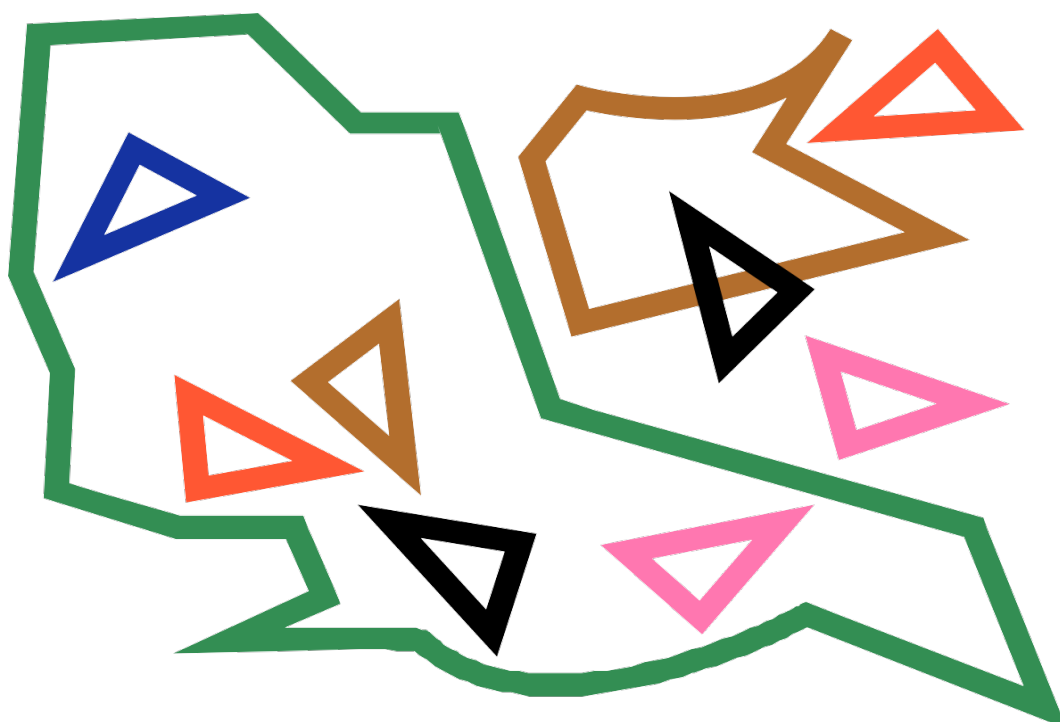


Policy Brief 12

Cooperation and inclusion on troubled borders: Greece-Bulgaria-Türkiye

B-Shapes - Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies

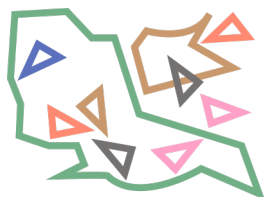


Authors: Martin Klatt, Martin Guillermo Ramirez, Ana Nikolov, Petranka Nedelcheva



Funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



Executive Summary

B-SHAPES research covered one external border region of the EU: the border between Türkiye on one side, and Greece and Bulgaria on the other. Our fieldwork with the Turkish Muslim minority in Greece, our borderwalks, and three policy workshops in northeastern Greece with local stakeholders revealed that these borderlands are different from the others we did fieldwork in. The Bulgarian-Greek border continues to be burdened by its heritage as a closed Cold War border, while the border of both countries with the Turkish republic is heavily militarized and susceptible to the changing relations between Türkiye and the EU. Nonetheless, there have been attempts to improve the situation in the border communities, as well as there is a vivid border economy on the Bulgarian and Greek side of the border with Türkiye.

This Policy Brief is based on our field work (a border walk in the Iyaylovgrad region, a fact-finding visit to minority institutions in Komotini and Xanthi, a workshop and interviews with young members of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace) and the discussions of three policy workshops in Thessaloniki, Drama and Alexandroupolis, with regional stakeholders in cross-border cooperation.

Based on these findings, this Policy Brief recommends that regional stakeholders be encouraged to continue their efforts to build cross-border networks and look for cross-border opportunities, including the Turkish community despite the complicated geopolitical situation between Greece and Türkiye



Context

The borderlands this policy brief is based on have a troubled history. Today's border between Greece, Bulgaria and Türkiye dates back to the post World War I peace settlements and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. This treaty ended the Greek-Turkish war and stipulated a population exchange, requiring Muslims to leave Greece for the Turkish republic, and Orthodox Christians to leave the Turkish republic for Greece. Only two communities were exempted from this drastic measure of religious, but as well ethnic homogenisation: the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul and the Turkish-Muslim community in Western Thrace. After the Second World War, until 1989, the border between Greece

and Bulgaria was a Cold War border and closed for most travels. It was fenced and heavily guarded. Bulgaria has now (January 2025) joined the Schengen zone resulting in an open border with Greece. The border with Türkiye has been a hot spot of undocumented migration and definite pushes of migrants to the border by the Erdogan government, resulting in pushbacks by Greek border guards as well as FRONTEX involvement and solidarity addresses from the EU (with the Greek government perceiving this migration as a threat).

Otherwise, cross-border relations are developing. Infrastructure investments will improve connectivity to the harbour of Thessaloniki from both Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Road infrastructure of the Thessaloniki-Thrace-Edirne-Istanbul corridor is excellent, which, alas, cannot be said about the more or less defunct railway line. There is a considerable border economy on both the Greek and the Bulgarian side of the border, driven by gambling (Bulgaria) as well as dining and shopping, here mostly electronics and alcoholic beverages.



Evidence, Analysis, and Results

Our research revealed three different but interconnected characteristics of the borderlands:

1. Landscape: the Rhodope Mountains and their forests bear traces of the former Cold War border. During the Cold War, it was perceived as less guarded than for example the border through divided Germany, attracting defectors who attempted to cross into Greece. In effect, the border was guarded quite sophisticatedly, and there were incentives for border guards to shoot defectors (extra leave). Until today, the exact number of defectors who have died crossing the border remains unknown and unresearched.
2. Peripherality: the region has been characterized by peripherality. Peripherality and low cross-border networks among stakeholders result in a vicious cycle of out-migration and over-ageing. Some rural regions have experienced more than 50% out-migration. Experiences from Western and Northern Europe cannot be simply translated into the Balkans: Balkan border regions are extremely underdeveloped.
3. Geopolitics: a heritage of conflict still impacts the region. Greece and Bulgaria both sought and won (after conflict) independence from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Borders have changed frequently during the late 19th-early 20th century. The Cold War border closure between Greece and Bulgaria had a strong impact on local farming, herding and foresting customs. Special permission was required to enter the border zone in Bulgaria. The communities affected most by these geopolitical problems were the Turkish minorities in Greece and Bulgaria. The ethnic composition of the region's population changed drastically: Jewish, Turkish and other ethnicities of the Ottoman Empire migrated, voluntarily and by force. Assimilation policies were implemented in Bulgaria (adopting Slavic names instead of Turkic), while the Turkish minority in Greece is heavily impacted by the trauma of the 1923 population exchange. They were exempted from the exchange but nevertheless faced with anti-Turkish sentiments in its aftermath.

Greece is not part to the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ERCNML) and still maintains that there is no Turkish minority, only a Muslim minority as codified in the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923. There are many issues of stigmatization and perceived or real discrimination. The minority has been perceived as a threat to Greek sovereignty over Thrace long before the perceived aggressive foreign policy of the Erdogan government. The Cyprus conflict has had an impact, too. Negative developments on the island have resulted in discrimination in Thrace. For example, the prohibition of founding private associations including "Turkish" in their name, since Türkiye established the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. It was also mentioned that school textbooks used on either side painted a dark picture of the neighbouring countries' citizens. No agreements on strategies for reconciliation exist.

Greek stakeholders warned about increasing Euroscepticism. Some expressed a perception of distance with the Western Balkans, Bulgaria and Türkiye as neighbours. There is a perception of Hypocrisy with the de-facto acceptance of the 1974 Turkish intervention in Northern Cyprus (which Greece perceives as an occupation), while Russia's invasion of Ukraine is condemned and Israel's invasion of Gaza is tolerated.

A clear backlash is perceived by stakeholders, who described that they did have cross-border workshops and meetings with politicians and other stakeholders from Türkiye – some of them being imprisoned today for political reasons. Problematic aspects about the rule of law in Türkiye was named as a central factor making cooperation impossible at the time. It should be noted, too, that the European Commission's 2024 rule of law report states that less than half of the Greek population and companies perceive the judiciary to be independent.

Impact

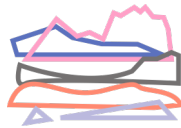
The impact of these three factors weighs heavily, but there is also commitment to improve cooperation. The rich, shared archeologic heritage in the region points to a common history and the region's interaction with and within the great empires of the past (Alexander the Great's empire, the Roman/Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman Empire). The acceptance of this heritage and the opportunities it gave should be a guiding narrative to improve cooperation despite multiple serious challenges. Our informants all expressed hopes and inspiration to work in this direction. It is crucial to focus on the positive European agendas as cooperation and mobility and capitalize on them. Tourism potentials are not fully used (cheaper/less spoiled than most Greek islands and Bulgarian Black Sea resorts). It is important, though, not to equalize peripherality with sustainable tourism, only. There have been and are opportunities for other industries, too (i.e. tobacco production heritage).

While mental borders were stressed by informants, they also believed that the younger generation have overcome these to a certain degree. The open border between Greece and Bulgaria (Schengen implemented on 31 March 2024) was appreciated. Interreg projects between Bulgaria and Türkiye helped to build trust.

Perceptions of peripherality depend on mental mapping. The border city of Alexandroupolis is only 4-5 hours by car from Istanbul and Sofia, less than Athens.

The geopolitical challenges (lack of rule of law in Türkiye, perceived aggressive Turkish foreign policy, migration challenges, lack of recognition of Turkish minority) make cooperation very difficult, nevertheless participants asserted that local communities could work together. Greek participants

insisted on the term “Muslim minority” instead of “Turkish minority” but accepted that they are there. Young people experience border regions as nationalistic and have difficulties to reconcile this with their open minds. They are more open to exploring the culture across the border and finding similarities.



Policy Recommendations

- The EU should consider taking the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) into account when designing borderland policies, perhaps combined with Interreg, as many border regions have agricultural mono-structures. A special borderlands agricultural policy might open new perspectives for peripheral border regions lagging behind in socio-economic development
- Regional stakeholders should take into account qualitative aspects of the borderland population as religion and identity when implementing policies such as Interreg
- Regional stakeholders cannot solve the issue of the legal recognition of the Turkish minority as national minority but they can move to cooperate with them and include their associations in planning cross-border activities
 - Young members of the community often are highly educated and live cross-border lives, interacting with Greek and Turkish people on all levels, perceiving themselves as bridge-builders between the different communities
- We recommend to remember previously existing cross-border networks between regional stakeholders in Greece and Türkiye to be revived. Cultural, socio-economic cross-border cooperation should take place where possible and will be a trust-building instrument in cross-border regions
- Regional stakeholders should remember the importance focus on the local cross-border perspective, instead of the difficult geopolitical perspectives they will not be able to solve
- Engage young people, give them responsibility and resources!
- The newly established AEBC Task Force CrossBorder Business/SME in border regions could serve as a best practice example: it empowers local stakeholders from different European border regions and encourages them to think across borders, network with other border regions

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)

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/>

March 2026



A project funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101095186.