
BULGARIA-MACEDONIA CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES FROM THE BULGARIAN POINT OF VIEW

Ivaylo Stamenkov, Ph.D

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", istamenkov@gea.uni-sofia.bg, i_sta@abv.bg

Abstract: For decades, the European Union devotes considerable attention to the role of Cross-border cooperation as a factor for development. The theme becomes even more important after the recent enlargements of the Union and the increased number of its internal and external borders. This is clearly attested by the announcement of the "European territorial cooperation" as a specific objective for the 2007-2013 programming period in which one of the main instruments is the Cross-border cooperation. More and more important is the study of the external borders of the European Union where Member States have a mutual interest in improving regional development, as well as their relationships, stability, and prosperity, especially when these neighboring countries are less developed. The Cross-border cooperation is no exception to the general trends of political and economic integration in Europe, and of the recent Europeanization in various scientific fields. Therefore, the study is based on contemporary and supranational topics related to demographic changes and their results, centralization and decentralization, polarization and peripheralization, convergence and divergence, territorial cohesion, relations between urban and rural peripheral spaces. All of them are researched on the basis of certain normative regulations, with respective vertical administrative levels and allocation of powers. The reason for selecting the border region between Bulgaria and Macedonia, two of the poorest countries in Europe, is related to its modern status – it is still difficult to disclose any sound and positive signs of Cross-border cooperation in this region. One of the major reasons for that is historical - regardless of the socialist character, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia often had not good enough relations in the period before the political changes in the late 80s of the 20th century. This makes the border heavily guarded and together with the predominantly mountainous character reflects negatively on the current state of the whole border region: remoteness, depopulation, emigration, insufficient infrastructure and connectivity of the two transport systems, economic stagnation, etc. The poor cooperation is further deteriorated by the lack of daily commuters, joint industrial initiatives, research and development, competitiveness and investment. The three existing checkpoints are insufficient and opening new ones can accelerate the Cross-border cooperation. Increasingly needed are common cross-border actions to halt these negative trends using if necessary the experience of some more developed countries. The main objective of the study is to identify different kind of problems in the Bulgaria-Macedonia border region and to offer different alternatives for solving them.

Keywords: Cross-border Cooperation, Bulgaria, Macedonia, border area, regional development.

1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, the European Union devotes considerable attention to the role of Cross-border cooperation (CBC) as a factor for development. The theme becomes even more important after the recent enlargements of the Union and the increased number of its internal and external borders. This is clearly attested by the announcement of the "European territorial cooperation" as a specific objective for the 2007-2013 programming period in which one of the main instruments is the CBC. More and more important is the study of the external borders of the European Union where Member States have a mutual interest in improving regional development, as well as their relationships, stability, and prosperity, especially when these neighboring countries are less developed.

The idea of the study is based on the longstanding spatial inequalities between the countries of Western and Eastern Europe and the different role and importance that they have to the border and border regions. These processes continue even nowadays with European integration and enlargement of the European Union. One way to solve this interdisciplinary problem is to transfer knowledge and best practices, and thereby foster the exchange of experience between the more prosperous West European countries and the less developed Eastern European countries. This is fully applicable to the field of study of border areas and opportunities for CBC.

As in Western Europe a large amount of scientific literature was published in this domain and a large number of experts from various professional fields are employed in it, it is necessary to highlight the importance of Geography in such studies. Still in some countries in Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria, the role of this science in the overall spatial development policy, and in particular in the regional development policy which increasingly seeks perspectives in CBC, remains underestimated and undervalued. In Western Europe Geography has gained position

as one of the leading spatial sciences with special contribution to the spatial planning system, including the cross-border and transboundary regions. A very important task of it is not only to describe and explain the use of space and its impact on spatial structures and processes, but also to contribute finding spatially significant decisions.

2. THE CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF BORDERS

The Cross-border cooperation is no exception to the general trends of political and economic integration in Europe, and of the recent Europeanization in various scientific fields. Therefore, the study is based on contemporary and supranational topics related to demographic changes and their results, centralization and decentralization, polarization and peripheralization, convergence and divergence, territorial cohesion, relations between urban and rural peripheral spaces. All of them are researched on the basis of certain normative regulations, with respective vertical administrative levels and allocation of powers.

Borders (whether interstate or internal) are subject of interdisciplinary research for decades in which a huge number has been taken of social sciences. As basic science became "Limology" which studies borders, but as well border regions, institutions, functions, and processes. Usually when studying the cross-border territories, the subject are the intergovernmental political demarcation lines. At the same time it is more and more important to realize the meaning of internal borders with their socio-economic, cultural, and administrative-political aspects. In both cases, however, the spatial interpretation is multifaceted: the border can be a barrier, peripherals, neutral border, contact zone or Integration Bridge (Rusev and Ellez, 2016).

In the present globalized world we are increasingly talking about disappearance of national signs and the change of the typical role and importance of such territories. Hereof the border area today performs not only physical but also psychological, cultural, social and other similar functions. Globalization transforms the world through economic institutions "without borders" (multinational companies, international NGOs) and global harmonized financial systems and mechanisms. Total economization creates new identities in which borders put limits and approximate at the same time.

Borders and territory are variable quantities in space and time and their evaluation is heavily dependent on the specific historical stage in the development of the country. There are no nations inhabiting certain space and states that remain unchanged after their establishment, and every ethnic group has a specified historical period for habitation (Roussev, 1997). In different eras, political boundaries have different socio-economic, cultural-political, and military-strategic status. In this sense, the phenomenon of border zone on one side is intersection point between Geography and the bloc of public sciences, especially those related to the study of anthropological aspects, and on the other is placed among a wide range of factors: market and economic relations, social networking, standard of living, etc.

International borders are directly related to the formation of the political map in a certain spatial unit. This map depicts the historical and geographical development of societies, nations, cultures or tribes by continents, regions and countries. Its formation is a continuous transformation in historical perspective, associated with the development of human societies and civilizations and the changes in its political, cultural, demographic and economic algorithm. The historical and geography map of the Balkans express geospatial variations in the politically organized cultures and societies. The peninsula is characterized by a large number of new frontiers in the last three decades. They impress in the small region with their number and their diversity as well: formal and informal; between countries and regions; borders in the economic, social, political and cultural sphere; some of them with a clearly defined status and other put under dispute. In general the collapse of the west-east division since the early 90s of the 20th century led to a growing interest in the topic (Gropas, 2004).

The Balkan countries have a specific place in the processes of integration and inter-state cooperation. Until three decades ago, they have been suspended this process deliberately excluding integration in the former COMECON, which is more typical of interstate rather than inter-regional nature of the relationship. The CBC continues to evolve from decisions of national authorities on the basis of interstate agreements, not as in Western Europe where the regional level has a leading role. Growing political will for cooperation is essential, even between countries and regions with past conflicts. Only with joint efforts Balkan countries can use its strategic geographical position and become a bridge between western and eastern civilization. In this respect located in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula Bulgaria will play an increasingly important role in CBC in the region (Patartchanov, 2000).

3. THE BULGARIAN-MACEDONIA CROSS-BORDER AREA

The reason for selecting the border region between Bulgaria and Macedonia, two of the poorest countries in Europe, is related to its modern status – it is still difficult to disclose any sound and positive signs of CBC in this region. One of the major reasons for that is historical - regardless of the socialist character, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia often had not good enough relations in the period before the political changes in the late 80s of the 20th century. This makes the border heavily guarded and together with the predominantly mountainous character reflects negatively on the current state of the whole border region: remoteness, depopulation, emigration, insufficient infrastructure and connectivity of the two transport systems, economic stagnation, etc. Increasingly needed is common cross-border action to halt these negative trends using the experience of other more developed countries.

The border selected for analysis is with length 165 km and passes through almost entirely mountainous region in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula, part of the Osogovo-Belasica mountain chain. From north to south these are the mountains Osogovo (the Ruen Peak 2251 m. makes it the fifth highest of Bulgaria), Vlahina (Ogreyak Peak 1924 m.), Maleshevska (Ilyov Vrah 1803 m.), Ograzhden (Ograzhdenec 1748 m.) and Belasica (Radomir 2029 m.). The border area connects Southwestern Bulgaria with Eastern Macedonia, these are some of the less developed, peripheral regions of the two countries and for EU as a whole (INTERREG IPA CBC Programme, 2015). There are three border checkpoints: the main one between Kyustendil and Kriva Palanka, between Blagoevgrad and Delchevo, and between Petrich and Novo Selo.

If we take into account the cross-border NUTS 3 regions, the study area is 18.7 thousand km² with nearly 1 million populations. It includes two provinces of Bulgaria - Kyustendil (9 municipalities) and Blagoevgrad (14) and 3 statistical regions in Macedonia - Northeast (6 municipalities), East (11) and Southeast (10). For 2015 the Bulgarian part has an area of 9.5 thousand km² and population of 439 thousand people (respectively 8.6% and 6.1% of the national values) and Macedonian - 9.2 thousand km² and 527 thousand people (respectively 35.9% and 25.4% of the national values) (National statistical institute of Bulgaria, www.nsi.bg, and National Statistical Office of Macedonia, www.stat.gov.mk).

At municipality level in the Bulgarian part there are 7 cross-border municipalities: Kyustendil, Nevestino, Blagoevgrad, Simitli, Kresna, Strumyani and Petrich with a total area of nearly 4 thousand km² and a population of 210 thousand people in 2015 (respectively 3.6% and 2.9% of the national indicators). Common border with Bulgaria have six Macedonian municipalities: Kriva Palanka, Macedonian Kamenica, Delchevo, Pehcevo, Berovo and Novo Selo, covering an area of 2.3 thousand km² and having population of 72.5 thousand people for 2015 (respectively 9% and 3.5% of the national indicators).

Two of the seven bordering Bulgarian municipalities have as a center a village (Nevestino and Strumiani) and five are with center a city of different spatial significance. According to the current National Spatial Development Concept with regional importance (3 level) are Kyustendil, Blagoevgrad (having the opportunity to move to level 2 with appropriate future development) and Petrich (having the opportunity to fall to 4 level). The other four municipalities are of level 5 and have only local (municipal) importance. Five of the six Macedonian border municipalities are cities (out of 34 in the country), and the only one with a village center is Novo Selo. With supra-municipal importance and population over 10 thousand people are Kriva Palanka, Delchevo and Berovo while Kamenica and Pehcevo are with less than 10 thousand people, and together with Novo Selo are of primarily local importance (Markoski et. al., 2012).

4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC POSITION OF THE BORDER REGION

According to the National Statistical Offices in the analysis of the demographic situation on both sides of the border stands a constant negative tendency. The average demographic density of the thirteen municipalities is only 45 people per km² (53 people per km² in the Bulgarian part and 31 people per km² in the Macedonian), which clearly shows the peripheral nature and low population density. There are also permanent negative demographic trends. According to the national statistics only for the period 2010-2015, the population of the seven Bulgarian municipalities decreased by over 10 thousand people (-4.6 %), while in Macedonia with more than 2.3 thousand people (-3.1%). The highest decrease in population is in the municipalities of Nevestino (-18.9%), Kyustendil (-8.2%) and Strumiani (-6.1%) and the only municipality, which marks a slight increase throughout the discussed region is Kresna (+2.1%).

Examples of larger demographic differences on both sides of the border can be identified the age structure indicators. The figures for 2015 are significantly less favorable in the seven Bulgarian municipalities where nearly every fourth person is over the working age (24.5%), while in working-age is 61.5% of the population. Nevestino

municipality holds the absolute record in this regard with 57.7% population over 65 years, with only 38.1% in working age. In the Macedonian municipalities indicators are more favorable - only 15.4% over working age population and 71.3% in working age (practically none of the municipalities have less than 70% workforce and more than 16.7% over working age).

Peripherality of the cross-border areas in the different regions is clearly visible in some economic indicators. The two Bulgarian NUTS 3 regions of Kyustendil and Blagoevgrad show values of only 57.5% and 65.4% GDP per capita of the national GDP (in Bulgaria = 100%). There is higher diversity in the Macedonian part: from 62.3% (in Macedonia = 100) for the North-East region, up to 93.3% for Eastern and the only exception is the Southeast region with values higher than the national - 109.6%. Negative development is observed in the indicators of average annual gross salary as well, where both Bulgarian regions show less than 90% compared to the national average, while the Macedonian - from 73.8% for the East region to 91.3% for the South East.

It is observed also more dependency on the agricultural sector compared to national values. The share that gives the agricultural sector in the Bulgarian state standard for 2014 is 7.9% for Kyustendil and 12% for Blagoevgrad (5.3% for Bulgaria) and in Macedonia compared to the national share of 11.5%, the Northeast region has the same proportion, Eastern region 12.4% and the record holder in this regard is the Southeastern region with 36.4%. The Bulgarian regions are relatively slightly lagging behind in the indicator of unemployment for 2015 compared to national average of 9.1% - 13.1% for Kyustendil and 10.3% for Blagoevgrad. In the Macedonian part are observed two extremes - here is the region with the highest unemployment Northeast (43.2%) and with the lowest unemployment Southeastern (16.7%), with good positions is Eastern (17.5%) while for the country the share is 26.1%. Additionally for the problem contributes the low-skilled labor and the insufficient partnership between business and education (Regions of the Republic of Macedonia, 2016).

Traditionally in the official strategic documents of the municipalities and NUTS3 regions and in this border region, tourism is regarded with priority as a tool for improvement and sustainability of the economic situation. In this respect as potential for various forms of tourism can be considered the mountainous terrain, biodiversity, clean environment, mineral springs and rich cultural heritage. For the future development of the sector, however, some challenges are given: global warming and the problem with snowfall for winter tourism; emigration of a large part of the young and educated population as a labor resource; unequal development of the sector in the cross-border communities on both sides of the border and within the framework of the NUTS 3 regions; spatial conflicts between tourism and protected areas; insufficiently common border concepts for both border regions, strategies and products. The currently existing cross-border tourist activities are mainly with cultural character (theater, art, culinary and craft festivals).

This border longtime has executed dividing functions, and the mountainous terrain, the relatively similar incomes in both countries, the language barrier (even being a small one), all these are among the key factors for insufficient cooperation of neighboring border communities, especially when it comes to daily commuters, common industrial initiatives, research and development, productivity, competitiveness and investment. The reason for this is also the insufficient transport infrastructure - Bulgarian-Macedonian border continues to be one of the few European borders without rail connection, although being a part of Pan-European Corridor 8. The opening of new checkpoints can accelerate the CBC. Besides the poor cross-border connectivity, problems occur also due to the insufficient integration of the two separate transport infrastructures and the infrastructure in mountainous and hilly mountainous regions, excessively high proportion of private vehicles, insufficient modernization of the existing checkpoints and others.

Similarities in cultures and languages can be viewed as a positive sign (Macedonian language is the closest one of all five neighboring countries of Bulgaria), as well as the state structure: unitary parliamentary republics with relatively limited presidential powers, multi-party system, unicameral Parliament, local government at the municipal level, etc. Significant difference is observed in the administrative division: there are 28 statutory administrative districts in Bulgaria between the national and municipal level, while the eight Macedonian regions between national and local levels are only for statistical purposes and have no administrative character.

5. PERSPECTIVES FOR THE BULGARIA-MACEDONIA CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

What is needed is political will to use the available prospects and possibilities for improving the Bulgarian-Macedonian border region. First of all, the international bargains and agreements have to be reconsidered or at least update the existing ones. Most of them are from the late 90s and are related to specific topics: trade, investment, transportation, transport, energy, customs cooperation, tourism and others. There are not enough productive visits

and meetings at subnational level, especially with regard to the neighboring local authorities. Perspectives in this regard are that the local bilateral documents with planning and economic nature could improve the general region condition. In addition, business can organize meetings and mutual investments should be encouraged. Ultimately, the main goal is to create economically competitive frontier space with stimulation of small and medium enterprises, agriculture and information and communication technologies.

A future reconsideration of the role that is given to the CBC in the strategic and planning documents is recommendable. The present ones clearly show that this is not seen as a factor for regional prosperity and development. Examples of this are from Bulgarian side Regional Development Plan of Southwestern region 2014-2020, The regional development strategies of Kyustendil and Blagoevgrad for the period 2014-2020 and The cross-border municipal development plans of the seven municipalities for the period 2014-2020. From Macedonian side these are the National strategy for economic development of the Republic of Macedonia (1997), National strategy for sustainable development of the Republic of Macedonia (2010), Spatial plan of the Eastern planning region 2013-2020, The programs for development of the Northwestern, East and the Southwestern planning region for the period 2015-2019, as well as municipal strategic documents of the cross-border local authorities.

Very substantial and indispensable perspective for the Bulgarian point of view is the improvement of infrastructure. First of all is the commissioning of the railway the Sofia - Skopje as part of Pan-European Corridor 8. It is necessary to improve the road network in some sections between the town of Radomir in Bulgaria and the town of Kumanovo in Macedonia. In the next stage can be reviewed and improved the access to the border region.

In any CBC a positive role plays the opening of new border checkpoints. In this respect, it is needed to be reviewed the agreement signed on 14.6.1999 between the two countries for the opening of two new crossing points between Simitli and Pehchevo and between Strumiani and Berovo and to drive the process of their construction. At the same time ongoing task remains the improvement of management of the three existing checkpoints.

One of the positive aspects of the current situation in the border region is the clean and preserved nature. Therefore the bilateral measures to protect nature and natural resources and dealing with natural disasters will be beneficial. In this way can be achieved sustainable development not only at local and regional level but also with national importance.

It is not possible to achieve a positive CBC without bilateral social activities at local level and through projects of a smaller scale. These could be cultural and language exchange, sports, recreation and tourism, labor market and others. It is needed in this respect the connection between civil society organizations and NGOs with official authorities on both sides of the border. In a positive future scenario the collaboration may extend to common planning and economic activities, including active citizenship.

Problem-solving for improving the future of CBC between Bulgaria and Macedonia is almost formal functioning of the Euro-regions in which both countries participate. Such examples are Euroregion Belasica and Euroregion Morava-Pcinija-Struma (www.cesci-net.eu). At this stage there is no official website even. The Euro-regions are the highest spatial form of CBC in recent decades, according to their status represents an interregional alliance with general consultative and coordinating functions, as well as joint management bodies.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Currently we cannot claim that CBC between Bulgaria and Macedonia is at good level. Its improvement requires effective coordination of different policies, actors, mechanisms for planning. Better vertical and horizontal coordination between decision-making authorities at different administrative levels, but also on sectoral themes, is needed. The perspective of using the experience of other European countries with positive bilateral relations remains. With such initiatives related to the Territorial Agenda 2020, Europe 2020 Strategy, and the Objective European Territorial Cooperation for the Programming Period 2007-2013, the EU clearly demonstrates its future commitment to the not well-developed border areas.

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