

Obstacles to Cross-border Cooperation and Integration in Western Balkan Countries

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Summary

In EU candidate countries, policymaking frequently focuses on internal affairs and the overall achievement of accession preconditions. In the EU, the importance of cross-border cooperation has been increasingly acknowledged as one means to improve resilience and development perspectives of border areas. Cross-border integration is a multifaceted and contextually contingent process that also matters for candidate and potential candidate countries. There is an increasing interest in identifying and tackling the negative impacts of border obstacles and solutions to boost cross-border integration. The European Commission (DG Regio), for instance, has launched a study on these obstacles in enlargement countries.

This article illustrates some of the dominant obstacles identified by the study. Obstacles to cross-border cooperation in the Western Balkan countries range from political, legal, and administrative to geographical, economic, and socio-cultural. They matter for many sectors and policy fields including emergency and risk management, environmental protection, education, and health care, to name a few. The obstacles' root causes vary greatly and require distinct solutions. Overcoming or at least lessening the impact of these obstacles often requires complex governance solutions. This article illustrates several entry points through which to improve the perspectives for cross-border integration in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: cross-border cooperation, border obstacles, Western Balkans, EU external borders

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Introduction

The focus of policymaking in EU candidate and potential candidate countries frequently focuses on internal affairs and the overall achievement of accession preconditions. EU policymaking, however, also demands additional and explicit cross-border cooperation and integration to contribute to cohesion. From this perspective, cross-border integration is central to improving the resilience and development perspectives of border areas. In the EU, this has been increasingly acknowledged by policy makers and is relevant for borders between EU Member States and beyond, including for instance, border with candidate and potential candidate countries. In the course of accession negotiations, candidate countries have to determine their ability to apply EU legislation (*acquis communautaire*) divided into 35 chapters. Cross-border cooperation and its policies are a cross-cutting theme underlying different chapters. Enhancing cross-border integration is frequently hampered by obstacles to cooperation, which limit the latter's potential benefits for border areas, both in the EU and beyond. Thus, addressing obstacles for cross-border cooperation is central to preparing candidate countries for EU membership.

In 2021, non-EU Member States in the Western Balkans benefit from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which aims to prepare these countries, *inter alia*, for using Cohesion Policy instruments in the future. The cross-border strand of IPA programmes ('Interreg IPA') is part of this preparation with a focus on implementing measures that may support the mitigation of obstacles to cross-border cooperation. To highlight the relevance of obstacles as well as potential means to mitigate or even overcome them, the European Commission has launched a study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'¹. This article illustrates some of the interim results of this study².

To put the study and its analysis into context, this article briefly reviews the political context for cross-border cooperation and describes the methodological approach towards identifying and structuring these obstacles. By means of examples, the article then illustrates some of the dominant obstacles identified by the study for border areas between EU Member States and candidate and potential candidate countries³. These illustrations look into the particular roots of selected obstacles as well as their effects and potential ways to mitigate them to support cross-border integration in the long run.

Political Context for Cross-border Cooperation

In recent decades cross-border cooperation has been gaining increasing attention in the EU due to the importance of its border regions. EU internal border regions cover 40% of EU territory and produce 30% of the EU's GDP. They are home to 30 % of the population and host almost two million cross-border commuters (European Commission, 2017a). Many of these regions are underdeveloped, due to their distance from administrative centres and insufficient infrastructure that negatively affects their connectivity. These regions face four principle types of obstacles: socio-economic disparities; cultural obstacles, including linguistic barriers and cultural differences; obstacles arising from legal and administrative differences; and physical obstacles limiting cross-border access (European Commission, 2016a)⁴. Estimations show that these obstacles have considerable negative effects. Economic losses due to legal and administrative barriers in cross-border are estimated to account for 3% of the EU's GDP and 8.8% of cross-border regions' GDP (Politecnico di Milano, 2017), which also negatively affect the number of jobs available in these regions. Other estimations illustrate the positive effects of removing obstacles – for instance removing 20% of the obstacles to cross-border cooperation in the EU would add 2% to the regions' GDP and create up to one million jobs (European Commission, 2017a). The same communication highlights ways in which the EU and its Member States can reduce the complexity, length, and costs of cross-border interaction and promote the pooling of services across internal borders. Experience shows that the opening of borders can create 'transition zones' with new opportunities for border regions' residents who may benefit from cross-border work, residential mobility, shopping, and health care, among other opportunities. This, however, requires facilitating framework conditions that are not sufficiently available in all border regions.

In view of the severe effects of obstacles for cross-border interaction, many initiatives have been taken to facilitate better cross-border cooperation between internal EU border areas⁵. This focus on internal EU borders is driven by the underlying principle to ensure a seamless functioning of the internal market and of the related 'Four Freedoms' (i.e., free movement of goods, free movement of capital, freedom to establish and provide services, and free movement of persons). Recently, this focus has shifted in two directions:

- Rather than identifying obstacles and challenges and trying to understand their

origins, initiatives are increasingly looking into what needs to be done or improved to ensure that border citizens can take full advantage of the opportunities offered on both sides of the border.

- Despite continuous efforts along internal EU border, the perspective has been widened towards external borders of the EU either by extending the analysis of EU-focused projects (e.g. ESPON (2019)) or explicitly looking at EU external borders (e.g. ESPON (2021)).

The study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries', on which this article draws, addresses both new directions. On the one hand side, it builds on accumulated knowledge about existing obstacles at internal EU borders and the efforts made to help border regions overcome them. Thereby, it combines an awareness and understanding of challenges for border regions with the intention to enable better cross-border cooperation and integration. On the other hand, it acknowledges that internal and external EU borders differ. Day-to-day problems caused by border obstacles are much more diverse and often more accentuated in external EU border areas such as the Western Balkans. Thus, obstacles as well as means and ways to facilitate better cross-border cooperation differ from what can be observed along internal EU borders, both in terms of the variety and quantity of obstacles and the efforts necessary to mitigate them.

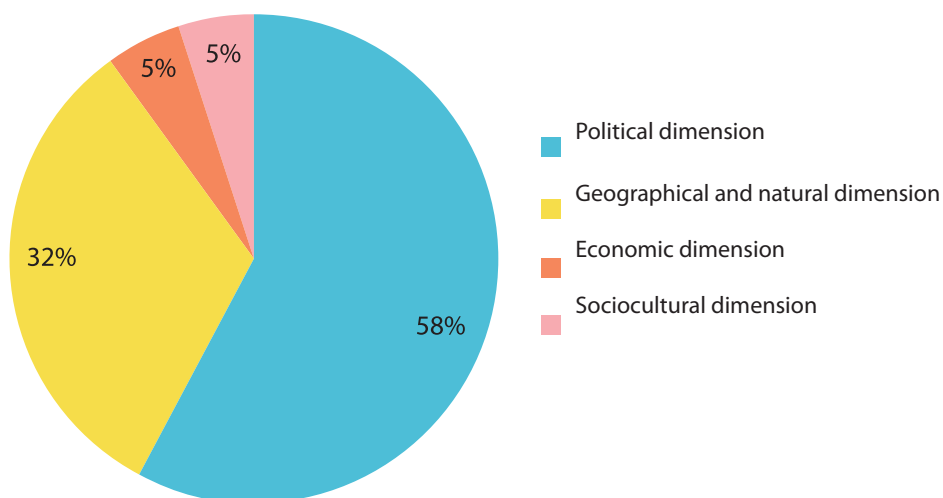
The four principal types of obstacles introduced above show that cross-border integration is

a multifaceted and contextually contingent process. The greater the differences between neighbouring countries are, the more relevant this is, as can be assumed for many borders of the Western Balkans. Asymmetrical relations based on significant differences and disparities may lead to strong interactions or may hinder them. Here, functional and perceptual dimensions matter. While differences may give rise to functional interactions between social, political, and economic actors, perceptions of residents and other actors may also affect actual interactions. The next section looks into the structures of these different influences.

Dimensions and Roots of Border Obstacles

The multifaceted character of cross-border cooperation matters for candidate countries in their aim to prepare for an eventual EU membership. The 'multi-dimensional border reality' concept assumes that all land borders have a simultaneous political, geographical and natural, economic, and socio-cultural dimension. Each dimension creates specific border effects that can prevent or hinder cross-border exchange relations (closure effects) or enable or further advance cross-border exchange relations (opening effects). Closure and opening effects may not only occur simultaneously between different dimensions but also within one dimension. Border obstacles are therefore specific closure effects emerging from these four border dimensions, but the 'roots' and scope of existing border obstacles are different throughout Europe. The combination of features matters for this.

Figure 1. Share of Obstacles by Dimension of the Root Obstacle (n=222)



Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'.

Obstacles to cross-border cooperation in Western Balkan countries may also be rooted in any of the four dimensions as observed at the borders between EU Member States. The study identified 222 obstacles in the Western Balkans with a focus on borders between candidate and potential candidate countries and EU Member States⁶. Most obstacles are rooted in the political dimension and relatively few can be linked to economic, social, and cultural dimensions (figure 1). This does not imply, however, that focusing on mitigating obstacles rooted in the political dimension is sufficient. Effects of obstacles of any dimension may be manifold and can be related to many sectors and policy fields, as outlined below. The following section presents, in more detail, obstacles to cross-border cooperation typically found in the Western Balkans by differentiating them across the four main dimensions while focusing on the political dimension to address its significance.

Legal and Administrative Obstacles

The politically defined nature of borders may lead to legal and administrative obstacles

hampering cross-border cooperation. Political disputes in the Western Balkans may be linked to a country's interpretation of borderlines and recognition. This implies, inter alia, complex or difficult relationships between some countries in the region, which are in turn visible in different obstacles to cross-border cooperation. Legal roots occur because of different national laws and in relation to introducing European Union law. Administrative conditions typically hampering cross-border cooperation are based in different and insufficient governance and administrative structures and adverse behaviour. The analysis shows that these adverse conditions frequently affect cross-border cooperation negatively in the Western Balkans. Without claiming to be comprehensive, table 1 summarises typical political obstacles observed in the Western Balkans. The box 1 complements the table 1 with selected insights.

About two-thirds of these types of obstacles are relevant for a specific border between two countries in South-Eastern Europe, which illustrates the importance of adequately harmonised rules and frameworks between

Table 1. Frequent Types of Political Obstacles in the Western Balkans

| Border & recognition | Legal conditions | Administrative conditions |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maritime border settings • Land border disputes on small border segments • Physical barriers and border control / custom / visa routines • Differences in status between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries • Smuggling of goods and migrants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacking harmonisation of legal framework in specific sectors (e.g., health, labour market, education, protected areas, and civil protection) • A lack of adequate introduction of the '<i>acquis communautaire</i>' hinders tackling joint challenges (e.g., in the fields of water, waste, and wastewater) • Pending conclusion or implementation of bilateral agreements • Travel restrictions due to border closures (including COVID-19) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex / time consuming administrative processes hampering cooperation and exchange in many sectors (e.g., emergency & disaster management and mobility) • Lack of capacities to engage in cross-border cooperation, either generally or in specific sectors (e.g., disaster management, infrastructure, and spatial planning) • Fragmented or unbalanced administrative structures hampering cooperation • Poor policy coordination (willingness) threatening biodiversity & environmental protection in border areas • Ineffective cooperation of administration (e.g., police) • Weak cross-border cooperation structures |

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'

Box 1. Selected Illustrations on Political Obstacles

Smuggling hampers smooth cross-border cooperation and interaction as a result of the **different status of countries** in the European integration process. The differences in status lead to a need for control at cross-border check points and cooperation. The analysis at the Greek-Albanian border showed that a lack of control and cooperation facilitates smuggling, which is exacerbated by socio-economic structures.

Obstacles resulting from a lack of consistent **legal frameworks or bilateral agreements** are evident in the case of **health care**. The analysis highlights the variety of harmonisation needs in terms of legislations, standards, and procedures. A lack of harmonisation prevents the development of a more efficient and inclusive system of cross-border health care services.

Weak cross-border **governance systems** hamper cooperation in border areas in the Western Balkans at different levels. Several **Euroregional structures** in South-East Europe exist only theoretically and do not facilitate cross-border cooperation, which negatively affects the effective implementation of Interreg IPA measures.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries.'

neighbouring countries, which is, inter alia, to be enhanced through the introduction of European Union law.

Geographical Obstacles

Obstacles of the geographical and natural dimension may be rooted in a lack of infrastructure to overcome natural barrier effects due to topographic conditions or inadequate natural resource management. In South-East Europe, most of these obstacles are rooted in the lack of cross-border (transport) infrastructure. Many of them refer to specific border crossings and illustrate the hampering effects of a lack of

efficient infrastructure and equipment at border crossings. These may be found along all borders in the Western Balkans and affect travel times for the transport of goods and people both along the main transport routes of the extended TEN-T network and other transport connections and crossing points. In some cases, this is furthered by unfavourable topographic conditions that require additional infrastructure investments.

The Western Balkans are rich with natural resources, many of which having a transboundary character. As such, inadequate or even a lack of cross-border natural resource management is another frequent obstacle in South-East Europe.

Box 2. Selected Illustrations on Geographical Obstacles

Lacking transport infrastructure may refer to different elements to facilitate cross-border mobility. Often this refers to inefficient border crossing infrastructure. In some cases, such as some connections between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, or North Macedonia and Greece, this is also about the need for further connections between the Orient / East-Med TEN-T core network to facilitate transport capacity. Current limitations of this network lie in damaged road and rail and partially missing rail infrastructure.

South-East Europe is rich with **environmental resources** in terms of its biodiversity; specific river, lake, and mountainous ecosystems; large forest areas; and cultural landscapes, to name a few. These resources include, inter alia, various transboundary river basins, which are an important common asset in terms of both climate change challenges and water quality. This makes transboundary rivers an important area for regional cooperation. The lack of transboundary river basin management along many borders is further hampered by a lack of harmonised legislation. Environmental rules and further transposition of EU rules into national legislation of Enlargement Countries is considered by Chapter 27 of the Acquis Communautaire.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries.'

This refers to natural resources in general as well as protected areas, the pollution of rivers and the sea, the building and energy production of hydropower plants, and illegal logging activities. While these obstacles are present along all borders in the area, their occurrence can be quite specific and concentrated on smaller parts of a border between two countries.

Economic Obstacles

Economic obstacles usually result either from barriers to the coordination of economic and sector policies supporting economic development or from socio-economic discontinuities, notwithstanding simultaneously occurring opening effects of discontinuities for cross-border cooperation. In South-East Europe, socio-economic discontinuities seem to be most relevant for cross-border cooperation obstacles linked to the economic dimension and appear particularly between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries. These disparities may hamper different spheres of life, from imbalances in funding infrastructure to skills development, cross-border labour market integration, and

business opportunities in border regions, and often represent a complex relation between sources of the obstacle and its effects as illustrated in the box 3.

Obstacles due to a lack of coordination of policies often result from a lack of human and financial resources. The identified obstacles show that countries and regions in South-East Europe are not prepared for such cooperation activities. Despite the low number of specific obstacles identified in this context, they tend to be evident in many parts of the region.

Social and Cultural Obstacles

Obstacles of the socio-cultural dimension may be rooted in different perceptions of belonging, historical legacies, cultural traditions, and languages, which are all quite visible in South-East Europe (see e.g. Lindstedt and Wahlström (2012), particularly expressed in bilateral disputes and nationalistic narratives. Some of these obstacles may be relevant more generally in South-East Europe while others can be linked to specific bilateral legacies, such as the example in box 4.

Box 3. Illustration of the Complexity of Obstacles resulting from Socio-economic Discontinuities

Spatial discontinuities are visible, for instance, in terms of GDP, GDP per capita, employment, unemployment, wage levels, and poverty. A comparison of GDP per capita in the multilateral border region Croatia-Montenegro-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia reveals that GDP per capita amounted to about 30% of EU average in 2018 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, less than 40% in Serbia and still below 50% in Montenegro compared to over 60% of the EU average GDP per capita in Croatia (Bonomi, 2020, p.4). Based on these disparities, the analysis emphasises the limitations on employment and labour mobility, which are accompanied by other discontinuities in terms of skills, capacities, funding of businesses and infrastructure, and innovation, among others.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'.

Box 4. Illustration of a Bilateral Socio-Cultural Obstacle resulting from Historical Legacy

The analysis identified a bilateral double-sided obstacle at the Greek-Albanian border. The role and status of the Greek minority in Albania and – to a lesser extent – the Albanian minority in Greece influence cross-border relations between the two countries. In addition to other different political matters and perceptions, mental barriers can be observed stemming from **different perceptions and interpretations of the historic legacy**, cultural traditions, and biases towards people living across borders. This may directly affect the social inclusion of specific groups, as well as in overall political and cultural exchanges between the countries.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'.

Mitigating Obstacles in Selected Policy Areas

The previous sections have illustrated that many different roots exist for obstacles to cross-border

cooperation in the Western Balkans and South-Eastern Europe more generally. These matter for many sectors and policy fields including, above all, transport and mobility, natural resources and

environmental protection, and civil protection and public security. These and the many other policy areas affected are illustrated in figure 2.

The different root causes of cross-border obstacles and their effect on policy areas vary and often require complex governance solutions to mitigate their impact. The following sub-sections illustrate these variations for selected themes and obstacles relevant for enhancing resilience in light of contemporary challenges such as climate change and the pandemic, focusing on those that are particularly important for addressing cross-border integration in the Western Balkans.

Natural Resource Management

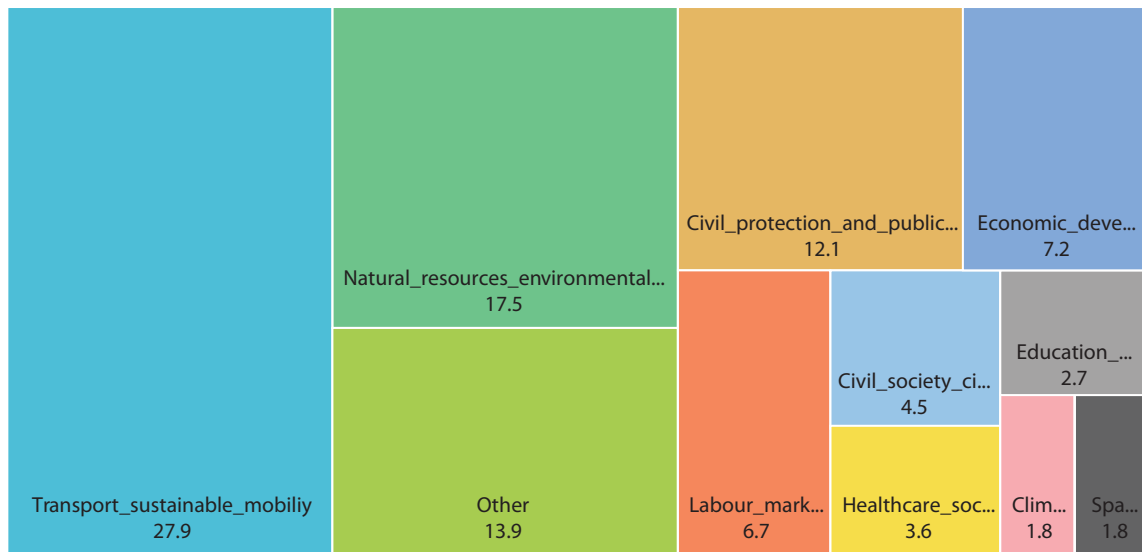
Box 2 highlighted the rich environmental resources of South-East Europe that do not respect administrative borders, such as lakes, rivers, forests, and mountains. Various transboundary river basins as well as many protected areas stretching across borders are important common assets. These resources are important for eco-system services as well as in

view of climate change challenges. Considering the transboundary nature of these resources and their importance for sustainable development, they need to be protected and managed in the context of cross-border cooperation. Different obstacles for transboundary natural resource management can be observed widely in the Western Balkans. They may be grouped as outlined in box 5. Further, related obstacles may be relevant for specific border segments.

Many of these obstacles are rooted either in a lack of harmonised legislation or insufficient administrative structures and behaviours, and often imply quite complex relations between the sources, problems, and effects of the obstacle. The negative effects of these obstacles are multiple. Citizens in border regions and beyond are affected as are the agriculture, tourism and other sectors relying on a healthy natural environment.

In light of this complexity, solutions to these obstacles may only be achieved if national and local authorities of the concerned

Figure 2. Relevant Policy Areas as % of all Identified Obstacles (n=222)



- Economic_development_RD_innovation
- Education_vocational_training
- Transport_sustainable_mobility
- Natural_resources_environmental_protection
- Spatial_planning_sector_policy_planning
- Civil_society_citizenship
- Labour_market_employment
- Healthcare_social_inclusion
- Climate_change_action
- Civil_protection_and_public_security
- Other

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'

territories cooperate and involve other actors, such as environmental agencies, relevant non-governmental organisations, and authorities managing protected areas (i.e., national parks). Governance solutions need to be specifically

adapted to the actual obstacle, the territory affected, and the legal and administrative framework. They may even change over time depending on the different measures to be implemented.

Box 5. Major Types of Obstacles for Transboundary Natural Resource Management in the Western Balkans

- Lack of human resources and coordinated approaches for planning and implementing integrated regional climate change strategies.
- Lacking or not fully developed transboundary river basin management.
- Lacking cross-border cooperation of protected area management.
- Fragmented administrative responsibilities in natural resource management hampering cross-border cooperation.
- Low wastewater treatment coverage is causing river pollution across borders.
- Inadequate solid municipal waste management is causing cross-border pollution of rivers and the sea.
- Extensive planning of hydropower development is threatening river systems with high conservation value.
- Threats to biodiversity due to the neglect of environmental needs in spatial planning and sector policies.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'

Box 6. Illustrations of Effects of a Lack of Cross-border Natural Resource Management for Border Regions

Insufficient levels of wastewater treatment coverage cause local health problems and is a key source of pollution of local surface and groundwater bodies in the Western Balkan region. Consequently, untreated municipal and industrial wastewater contributes to cross-border river pollution since many rivers in the Western Balkans are of a transboundary nature.

Weak transboundary water cooperation tends to increase the magnitude of various climate change related risks implying social, economic, and environmental effects, such as:

- significant economic and livelihood losses;
- lower productivity and economic losses in the agricultural sector due to rising temperatures;
- loss of crop yields and livestock due to water scarcity and droughts;
- displacement of the population;
- increased mortality and morbidity;
- decreased public safety; and
- impaired ecosystem functioning and loss of species.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'

Box 7. Illustration of Governance Arrangements to Enhance Transboundary River Basin Management

A transboundary 'nexus approach' enabling cross-sectoral and cross-country intervention is needed to address **transboundary river basin** challenges. Coordination between the water, energy, food, and environment sectors within one country (already encountering difficulties at the national level) is further challenged by the substantially increased complexity of transboundary basins. The 'nexus approach' to managing interlinked resources has emerged as a way to enhance water, energy, and food security by increasing efficiency, reducing trade-offs, building synergies, and improving governance while protecting ecosystems.

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The Western Balkans can build on several existing agreements and initiatives. Many of these initiatives require further implementation in cross-border contexts and greater involvement of local actors. Examples include:

- International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River;
- Framework Agreement on the Sava River Basin;
- Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative; and
- Initiatives for transboundary conservation by the International Union of Conservation of Nature

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'.

Civil Protection and Public Security

Although civil protection is mainly addressed at a national level, there are several cases where coordination across borders is deemed necessary, with implementation heavily depending on cross-border cooperation at the local level. Cases where citizen security and protection challenges (or their consequences) do not recognise national borders include organised crime activities such as the smuggling of products, illegal human trafficking, and illegal migration routes across borders. A second set of challenges relate to environmental threats and extreme weather event management, such as natural hazards and risk management. The Western Balkans is one of the regions of Europe in which challenges of both types of civil protection occur at transboundary level. It is a transit area for organised crime routes and activities and a region with a rich and vulnerable transboundary natural environment, frequently subject to extreme weather phenomena, such as fires, floods, earthquakes, landslides etc. The importance for resilience and sustainable development in the area highlights the necessity to look beyond national borders and opt for more coordinated efforts, which gives rise to different obstacles along different border segments in the Western Balkans. These obstacles underline the overall lack of coordination in civil protection. They can be grouped in the following two broad categories, as outlined in box 8.

The roots of these obstacles vary. The roots of organised crime are rather deep and can be

socio-economic, such as post-conflict instability and its economic challenges, continuous corruption, the presence of criminal organisations, the presence of important seaports and coastlines that enable the movements of illegal products across borders, and the price differentials of those products along and beyond EU borders (Transcrime and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 2019). Notwithstanding the state of national or local disaster management (beyond the scope of this analysis), the roots of a lack of common border disaster management may relate to the lack of national and local capacities in dealing with cross-border disasters, the lack of appropriate legal context, the lack of cooperation between national governments and NGOs, vulnerability of information, and insufficient monitoring and early-warning systems. These limitations and their resulting obstacles produce various economic, environmental, and social effects as illustrated in box 9.

Given the overarching character of the civil protection sphere, solutions may be achieved through the cooperation not only of different governmental levels, but also through coordination of the national, regional, and local authorities with citizens' groups and civil society and across borders. Solutions should always be adjusted to the different border specificities and frameworks, which will also indicate the most relevant cooperation structures. The box 10 touches upon two obstacles related to organised crime activities to highlight the necessity for stronger cooperation. The example of illegal migration shows how a nationally-oriented

Box 8. Major types of Obstacles for Transboundary Civil Protection in the Western Balkans

- Ineffective policy cooperation against organised crime, such as smuggling products, illegal migration routes, and human trafficking.
- Lack of common disaster management and inefficient measures for risk emergencies, natural hazards, and disasters.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'.

solution may pose further challenges and threats to the region. The example of smuggling activities shows that cooperation efforts can be promising for both sides of the border.

Box 9. Effects of a Lack of Common Border Disaster Management and Insufficient Measures for Risk Emergencies

A lack of coordinated disaster management may pose greater damages to the territories of the region, the people, the economy, as well as further threats to the overall environment. Various effects include:

- A risk to people's safety, such as injuries, accidents, and casualties resulting from high risks of water scarcity and more frequent flash floods as projected for South-East Europe in view of climate change;
- Technical and technological accidents or hazardous accidents, for instance, resulting from chemical pollution from agricultural activities and the illegal discharge of industrial wastewater;
- Further environmental damage, such as pollution and the destruction of forests and ecosystem services taking into account, for instance, different levels of wastewater treatment South-East European countries;
- Loss of income due to hazards on businesses and agricultural land, mirroring the high importance of agriculture as a source of income and employment in the region, which in turn contributes to higher consumer prices;
- Citizens' wellbeing at risk as ecosystems are destroyed, e.g. in regions where income and employment depends on natural resources (agriculture, tourism).

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries' and United Nations (2011).

Box 10. The Cost of Non-Cooperation in Addressing Illegal Migration vs Joining Forces for Combating Smuggling

Several borders around the Balkan peninsula served as **entry points for illegal migration** during the peak of the migration crisis in 2015 and 2016. As a temporary solution, different countries erected fences in different parts of their borders with other neighbouring countries to prevent people from entering their territory. Relevant examples are the fences between Greece and North Macedonia, Greece and Turkey, as well as Hungary and Serbia. Such approaches, however, had wider consequences than merely hindering migration. With these areas being home to a rich wildlife, the new 'man-made physical barriers' reduced ecological connectivity in the area. As a result, border fences along the 'green' EU's external borders increases the threat of habitat fragmentation and hinders the migration of larger mammals, especially wide-ranging animals such as bears and wolves. Therefore, this cost of non-cooperation is showing in wider and equally important further challenges.

As a counterpoint, Greece and Albania have initiated promising steps for **joint efforts towards combating smuggling**, particularly the smuggling of products. Increased controls and coordination efforts involving responsible national ministries as well as the police and customs offices of both countries have been considered to overcome the obstacle. Albania and Greece agreed to establish a new 'contact centre' located on the land border between the two countries, aimed at strengthening cooperation between the police and customs forces. More precisely, the centre will be based at the Kakavia border crossing on the Greek side of the border and will be staffed by police and customs officers from both countries. It will coordinate on illegal migration, human trafficking, and smuggling, among other activities. This cooperation effort has been formalised through an official agreement between Greece's Deputy Minister for Citizen Protection and Albania's Deputy Interior Minister for border issues, signed in January 2021. As of June/July 2021 the centre is still under development and efforts to staff it are under way. In addition to formal agreements, further cooperation at the local and municipal levels across the border will benefit coordinated actions against organised crime.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'.

Health Care

The obstacles related to cross-border cooperation between EU and candidate or potential candidate countries in the field of health care are primarily linked to insufficient coordination and harmonisation across countries and are rooted in the different national laws and regulations. This lack of coordination generates negative impacts on the cross-border area, affecting citizens who want to have access to medical treatment in neighbouring countries.

Since the fall of communism in the late 1980s, South-East European countries have maintained highly centralised health care systems, meaning that health care is primarily dealt with by national governments in an independent and autonomous way.

Moreover, the accession to the EU of only a few of these countries has made the administrative differences difficult to manage, leading to the creation of severe inefficiencies and producing further gaps and inequalities between neighbouring states with regard to health care accessibility and quality. These substantial differences usually generate significant flows of patients from candidate and potential candidate countries towards neighbouring EU Member States that offer higher quality health care systems, creating an imbalance that is difficult to correct.

This obstacle has an impact on various policy intervention fields, such as cross-border access

to health care services, hospital cooperation, and cross-border access to health insurance for cross-border workers. In the long term, the legal obstacles and insufficient cross-border coordination and cooperation at the regional and national level may lead to inadequate access to health services, the lack of continuity and quality of care and, overall, risk a good state of health of the population.

The framework conditions and challenges in the field of health care in the Western Balkans have numerous common features across countries. These can only be adequately and sustainably resolved through close cooperation⁹ not only at the national level, but also involving the regional and local level and possibly cross-border governance structures, such as Euroregions and Interreg IPA programmes. Actions towards removing barriers and allowing better access to health care should therefore be taken iteratively and at different levels. Efforts might include, for instance:

- collection and analysis of patient flows and health care needs in the cross-border area to map the actual needs coming from the territories;
- the organisation of knowledge exchange and trainings;
- coordination among relevant regions/counties on possible joint solutions guided by cross-border governance structures such as Euroregions; and
- the achievement of an agreement between national insurance companies removing administrative and legal barriers to accessing health care.

Box 11. Direct Effects of a Lack of Coordination and Harmonisation in the Access to Health Care Services across Borders

The main direct effects of a lack of coordination in health care are:

- restrictions in accessing services on the other side of the border;
- loss of time in accessing health care services, exacerbated by the presence of the Schengen border and the longer procedures at border crossing points;
- additional costs for services and procedures (e.g., the lack of agreements on cross-border access to health care forces patients to seek health care services in private clinics across the border);
- inefficient use of public infrastructure close to the border (e.g. hospitals).

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'.

Box 12. Example of Cross-Border Health Care Accessibility Challenges between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries

The Hungarian-Serbian border, in particular the border within the DKMT⁸ Euroregion area, is characterised by a high number of Serbian citizens who travel across the border to access health

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care services in Hungary because of the higher quality of services. However, since Serbian citizens do not have access to public health provision in Hungary, they are obliged to seek treatment in private clinics. The overall situation at this border has two main implications:

1. The one-way flow of patients from an IPA to an EU country.
2. Access to better health care can only be afforded by people with the necessary financial means to cover the expenses of private health care.

The first factor hindering cooperation between the countries is economic in nature. Since the number of patients coming from Hungary towards Serbia is minimal, this unbalanced flow of patients towards Hungary makes it difficult for the national health insurance companies to reach an agreement on broader use of public health services by Serbian citizens, as costs would be disproportionately higher for Hungary. This obstacle further negatively affects cohesion objectives, and particularly social cohesion.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries' and United Nations (2011).

Box 13. Illustration of an Approach to Overcoming the Lack of Cross-Border Health Care Accessibility

The experience of the DKMT⁸ Euroregion in 2005 provides an example of an attempt to achieve a concrete solution and the challenges that remain unaddressed. In the framework of the 2000-2006 Hungary-Romania-Serbia-Montenegro Programme, the DKMT Euroregion developed a cross-border project to find solutions to the lack of cooperation in health policies by replicating an initiative implemented by the Meuse-Rhein Euroregion (Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands). The project aimed to create a Euroregional health insurance card for people living in the DKMT Euroregion, allowing them access to the health care systems across the whole area, without national distinctions. However, due to the unbalanced flow of patients towards Hungary, the initiative was not supported by the national health insurance companies.

The involvement of active cross-border governance structures such as Euroregions can therefore be a possible way to initiate actions towards the elaboration of a concrete solution and build momentum for an agreement at the national level that would eliminate administrative and legal obstacles in the long term. The involvement of border hospitals, universities, and research institutions will also be key to understanding the actual needs of the territory.

Source: Authors based on the study 'Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries'.

Conclusions

The study behind this article highlights the need to move from national considerations, analyses, and policy making towards a more explicit consideration of cross-border issues. This move may not only benefit border regions but an enhanced cooperation experience may also be beneficial for national policies. Overall, this conclusion is taking a long-term perspective, as EU experience with increasing cross-border cooperation and integration shows.

Cross-border cooperation in the Western Balkans is still a sensitive matter in some border areas due to the enduring tensions linked to war legacies and different interpretations of recent history,

which persist among the younger, post-war generations through the educational system. The path towards improved cross-border cooperation cannot ignore these underlying issues; an open dialogue among institutions at all levels and among local communities, as well as concrete trust building activities should be encouraged in those areas where ethnic and religious divisions are still observable. The EU can play a crucial role in this through the enlargement process and cross-border cooperation programmes in the region (Interreg IPA), which can represent a powerful stimulus.

Experience with cross-border cooperation and integration along internal EU borders shows that solving obstacles requires **time, realistic**

objectives, and acceptance among stakeholders and citizens. Whether governance arrangements are straightforward or require more complex approaches, several tailored steps often need to be taken before actually overcoming the obstacle. Examples of such preparatory steps include:

- the creation of an adequate knowledge base through needs assessments, monitoring etc.;
- specifying the needs for cooperation on a particular obstacle and cooperation's benefits for the affected population;
- identifying initiators and important stakeholders to address the obstacle; and
- working on the specifics of the legal framework to garner further support from higher administrative levels on local challenges. (See e.g. Hermanek, 2015).

Based on these findings a few policy pointers can be detailed. Interreg IPA programmes are important for cross-border cooperation in the Western Balkans. Most programmes are bilateral, an element which does not sufficiently consider functional areas. In some cases, trilateral programmes would be better for considering functional economic or environmental areas. Alternatively, territorial flexibility of bilateral programmes could be promoted to involve stakeholders from outside the programme area, including stakeholders from neighbouring countries when it would be beneficial for a project and justified by functional links.

This finding is closely linked to the identified need for capacity building and awareness raising about the opportunities of Interreg IPA programmes, which should be particularly targeted to the regional and local levels of government, as they usually have less capacity. In this context, actions aiming to address obstacles hampering cross-border cooperation and integration in a strategic manner may be favoured. Finally, national authorities may have to reconsider adequate levels of decision-making. In line with subsidiarity principles, more responsibility may need to be decentralised to regional and local levels. Decisions, for instance, related to cultural exchanges, events, and Balkan Forums may benefit from more local involvement and broader scope.

Western Balkans transboundary organisations should also amplify their communication role. Flagging cooperation topics of concern among communities to Interreg IPA programmes and their authorities could support targeting

programme activities. This could be facilitated, for instance, if these organisations act as observers to these programmes.

Finally, border regions need stronger cross-border cooperation structures. These can facilitate many cooperation processes and initiate measures to tackle challenges specific to border regions on behalf of their members. This will help bridge the interests of citizens, local governments, and national decision makers across borders.

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Notes

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2021/03/03-03-2021-cross-border-obstacles-between-eu-member-states-and-enlargement-countries-fill-the-survey

² The focus of this paper is on the Western Balkans. However, the analysis of this study was carried out for the whole of South-East Europe (excluding Cyprus) and relations between all these countries. Whenever the paper refers

to South-East Europe, findings go beyond the Western Balkans but are also relevant for the countries of the Western Balkans. Thus, South-East Europe in this paper refers to all enlargement countries plus Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Romania.

³ The study focus is not on relations and cross-border obstacles between IPA countries. Thus, they are not explicitly or separately addressed.

⁴ The Eurobarometer survey 2015 identified five challenges (% of respondents): Language differences (57%), social and economic differences (46%), legal and administrative differences (45%), cultural differences (32%) and the accessibility obstacle (30%) (European Commission, 2016b, pp.5–6).

⁵ Examples include 'Easing legal and administrative obstacles in EU border regions – ELABOR' (European Commission, 2017b), 'Cross-border Cooperation – Capitalising on existing initiative for cooperation on cross-border regions' (European Commission, 2018), ESPON Cross-border public services (ESPON, 2019) and the b-solutions initiative (<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>).

⁶ This inventory of obstacles does not claim to be complete since its compilation is subject to available literature and documents and information gathered through a survey in Spring 2021. In addition, the inventory refers to the situation in the first half of 2021 without further differentiation over time and includes not only the Western Balkans but the EU's external border with Turkey as well.

⁷ <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/261359/greece-albania-establish-cross-border-crime-prevention-center/>

⁸ Danube–Criş–Mureş–Tisa

⁹ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/10758.pdf>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.