

Strengthening Multilevel Governance in the European Union: the Case of Project BRAINS

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Project BRAINS (Bulgarian-Romanian Area Identities: Neighbourhood Study) has been implemented from 2011 to 2013 by Bulgarian-Romanian Interuniversity Europe Center (BRIE), a structure for cross-border cooperation in higher education and research, established in 2002 by the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies (Romania), University of Ruse (Bulgaria), German Rectors' Conference and German universities. The project has been initiated within the Programme for Cross-Border Cooperation Romania-Bulgaria 2007-2013 as part of the Territorial Cooperation objective of EU cohesion policy. It is consistent with the strategy of the Programme, which aims at the establishment of joint frameworks of the Bulgarian-Romanian Cross-border Region, where cooperation between stakeholders is being developed, so that regional identity of the cross-border area can be strengthened. **Strengthening regional identity means strengthening multi-level governance.**¹ Regional identity is a governance tool, which is central to the people's volition in achieving common goals. It raises their personal activity and influences, secures

¹ Multi-level governance (MLG) is now a broadly accepted concept describing governance of the EU. It was coined by Gary Marks and Liesbet Hooghe. In 1996, in their paper, called 'European Integration from the 1980s: State-Centric v. Multi-level Governance' they argued that collective decision-making at EU level and growing competences of supranational institutions limit sovereignty of European states. About 5 years later, they reconfirmed their thesis. They depict European integration as a polity creating process in which authority and policy-making are shared across multiple governance levels - subnational, national, and supranational. A multi-level polity has emerged, and its most visible outputs include monetary policy, competition policy, regional policy, market regulation, and elements of industrial relations, law and order, and education. (See: Marks, G and L. Hooghe. Multi-level Governance and European Integration, Rowman &Littlefield, 2001). Thus, MLG approach considers EU a political system of its own, which may be contrasted to national political systems. MLG functions when experts from several tiers of government and in conjunction with relevant interest groups, share the task of policy making. European policy therefore, is the result of a

public participation in decision making². Obviously, **the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region is in a process of construction and lacks identity as a territorial entity**. We decided to address this problem for several reasons.

Firstly, because of its European implications: in EU25 cross-border cooperation is being gradually replaced by integration, a holistic view over the territory and its integrated governance, but in EU27 the Romanian-Bulgarian region is divided rather than united and represents a challenge for the achievement of European territorial cooperation goals. The new joint check points and the facilitated border controls have been signs of de-bordering and re-bordering, which we have been witnessing since 2007. The national demarcations have been fading away and boundaries of a new transnational entity started to emerge. But this is only the beginning of a complex process on transformation of space and people, which invites policy makers within the EU multi-level governance (public, private and the civil sector) to get involved. Stakeholders, on both sides of the border have to address the issue of separated lands, and negotiate its conversion into a part of common European space with free movement of labour, goods, services and capital.

Secondly, the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Romania-Bulgaria is at the beginning of its implementation and needs a broad regional consensus on the identity of the region as a stepping stone for its development. Project BRAINS offers a vehicle for such consensus, i.e. the legitimate ground of epistemological arguments about the area. The project explores existing objective evidences and subjective perceptions of local people about the region and about the neighbor across the border. It addresses questions, such as: What do local people know about the place(s) they belong, What should local and other people know about the neighbourhood area and its unique assets, so that they are motivated to identify with it. To start answering them, we decided to investigate the 'brains' of more than 4 000 people who belong to the area, to

constant negotiation across different territorial levels. The main characteristics of the relationship between these different tiers are overlap and interdependence. However, this interaction does not mean a vertical dimension of the European policy process. MLG theory also suggests the existence of a horizontal dimension. Coordination not only takes place across different territorial levels but also within them. The result is a complex process which involves politicians, actors of the civil society and the private sector. They all intervene according to their goals, resources and competencies. According to Stubbs, 'A multi-level governance perspective forces one to address processes of the supranationalisation, the decentralisation and the dispersal of authority as potentially coterminous...' (See: Stubbs, P. (2005) 'Stretching Concepts Too Far? Multi-Level Governance, Policy Transfer and the Politics of Scale in South East Europe'. *Southeast European Politics*, Vol. VI, No. 2, 66-87, p.67).

² Raagmaa, G. *Regional Identity in Regional Development and Planning* // *European Planning Studies*, Vol. 10, Iss. 1, 2002.

collect, produce and disseminate knowledge related to the profile of the Romanian-Bulgarian region.

Thirdly, the cross-border region has been labeled poor and lagging behind because of its socio-economic characteristics, as evidenced by Eurostat. This label affects the identities of the people, and deprives them of expectations for a positive change. It hides strengths and is contra-productive, when it comes to motivation for transformation. Catalyzing change in such an identity means to assure drivers of human effort, needed to overcome the current negative socio-economic condition. Therefore, **there is a demand to re-negotiate the identity of local people on the basis of long term cross-border identity policy. This is the basic claim of project BRAINS.**

Fourthly, from a political science point of view, identity has become a crucial topic of international relations and European studies after the end of the Cold war. Experts of the disciplines have identified the innovative potential of social constructionism and have analyzed attempts changes of state identities or attempts for mobilization of group identities to re-appear as states. In 1989 Nicholas Onuf argued, that we are living in a world, which is under social reconstruction, a 'world of our making'.³ Martha Finnemore has explored national interests and has concluded, that they are not somewhere there, waiting for us to be discovered through empirical data and positivist methods, but are under construction within social interaction.⁴ Alexander Wendt has defended the thesis, that anarchy of world politics is what states make of it. In fact, states construct their identities in processes of negotiations on the norms, that these identities incorporate. Political and economic behaviours of states are predefined by the identities they strive to construct.⁵ European integration is also a process of social construction. For example, European citizenship is a social construct on norms and is a result of negotiations on the identity of citizen of the post-national European Union policy⁶. In the context of European integration social construction of regional (subnational) identities has become a broadly adopted practice. Another finding, which has impacted the conceptualization of the research, refers to the study of R. N. Lebow, entitled *Identity and International Relations*⁷. Having thoroughly explored Homer's

³ See. Onuf, N. (1989), *World of Our Making*, University of South Columbia Press.

⁴ Finnemore, M., (1996) *National Interests In International Society* (New York: Cornell University Press), p.2.

⁵ Wendt, A. (1992) 'Anarchy is What States make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization* (46) 391-426.

⁶ Rosamond, B. (2006) *New Theories of Integration*.// Cini, M. *European Union Politics*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, p.130.

⁷ Lebow, R. N. (2008) *Identity and International Relations*. // *International Relations*. December 2008, vol. 22 no. 4, pp 473-492.

Iliad, he rejects the thesis, that generally speaking, identities emerge in binary oppositions, i.e. simultaneously with the emergence of negative stereotypes about the Other. He claims, that my/our identity is constructed before the construction of the image of the Other, that the Other is not necessarily associated with negative connotations. The boundaries between identities are plastic and the construction of the identity may occur as a result of positive encounters with otherness.

On such grounds, the research project BRAINS views European Union as an environment for the construction and positioning of new identities, including **the identity of the cross-borderer** as the identity of the citizen belonging to the space, where border barriers have been removed. It is also important to note that the construction of the identity of the cross-border could be based on salience of positive characteristics of the area and neighbours across the border.

Thus, the most intriguing challenge of project BRAINS is its goal to **'test the potential for the construction of the identity of the cross-borderer in the Romanian-Bulgarian region.** A region of about 5 million people has been constituted with view to territorial cooperation, which is the third strategic goal of the cohesion policy of the European Union⁸. It overlaps with the territories of 7 Romanian counties and 9 Bulgarian districts situated along the Danube. In this common area Romanian and Bulgarian citizens have to find a common language (in the direct and figurative sense of this notion) in order to co-exist, work, educate themselves, undertake medical treatment, spend their holidays, create families, cooperate to do business, unite in groups with common interests, etc.

Which are the main challenges for the construction of the cross-border identity, that project BRAINS takes into account?

Firstly, local citizens have **to rethink the notion of 'border' from the times, when the nation-state was born.** If in the 19th century Europe it was strongly believed, that the boundary should be impermeable, i.e. inclusive and exclusive, since the second half of the 20th century the post-national polity European Union calls for reconsideration of such assumptions. It views border lands as territories, where borders are being overcome by human communities for whom the

⁸ The general goal of the regional policy of the EU is economic prosperity and social cohesion on the whole territory of the EU, which covers 271 regions of 27 member states. For the 2007-2013 period three concrete goals are relevant: Convergence; Regional competitiveness and employment; European territorial cooperation (interregional, transnational and cross-border cooperation). The third goal is associated with questions, such as: How to capitalize on the strengths of the territory? How to cope with concentration? How to connect territories better? How to develop cooperation?

perceptions of the 'self' and the 'other' lose identification relief. Here the transition from one societal system to another and the mediation between cultures become modes of life, and life on the border urges for absorption of identity constructs, characteristics of the neighbor. This new, hybrid identity is knowledge based, it is a product of remoteness from respective national centres and proximity to 'otherness' as part of everyday routine life. In the different European cross-border regions the construction of such an identity has reached different levels of ripeness. For example in the first cross-border region, founded in 1958 and called EURegio, it is so much developed that is made explicit through a general assembly, a type of cross-border local parliament representing the citizens of all 130 German and Dutch municipalities.

Secondly, local people should not only re-think the concept of the border, but should understand the practical implications of overcoming the border.

The most important implication is that they have to be involved in building trust with those, perceived as being different. On the Bulgarian-Romanian border the Latin alphabet meets the Cyrillic and therefore, the difference is visible and salient. The **formation of 'We' groups between Bulgarians and Romanians**, the identification of common values, common truths, common interests, common goals, the realisation of common activities is a challenge not only for language reasons, but also for legacies of the remote and recent past.

The second implication is that local people should be involved in processes of **differentiation from the national group**. Cross-border relations presuppose inevitable conflicts with the national environment. They are due to national regulations and practices and made explicit by concrete local actors, who perceive themselves as potential losers in the context of a borderless region, and whose rational interest is linked to the monopoly of the nation state. Such actors view change as a threat to their own security. It is worth reminding, that one of the most important goals of European institutions has always been to provide instruments, which counteract multiple national barriers to cooperation, and which are known as **negative integration**⁹, i.e. practices of eliminating national restrictions to the free movement of goods, services, people and capital within the EU.

From **methodological point of view** we adopted **the theoretical basis of social constructionism** and abandoned the viewpoint of the essentialists who claim that identity is given once and for all and is not subject to change.

⁹ See: Marks, G., Governance in the European Union, SAGE, 1996, p. 15.

Constructionists believe, that truths about the world are produced by and depend on human individuals, on their thoughts and perceptions, that truths are constructed as a result of social dialogue. The so called 'objective reality' is socially constructed, it is influenced by the attitudes of those constructing it and emerges under the influence of historical, cultural, political and economic conditions. It is for this reason that knowledge varies depending on historical periods and the cultural environment in which it appears (with its values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, practices of human individuals and groups). So, unlike positivism, which accepts the world as a given entity, **constructionism looks at the world as a project in process of construction**, as something under making and not as something given once and forever. Being engaged in a dynamic world, in the conventions of social relations, in inter-subjective and collectively significant structures and processes, constructionists assume that science has its ethical standard and is to change the world, to construct it differently, to subject it to re-negotiation with the goal, to make it more acceptable. Therefore, we agreed to adopt the following working definition: **Identity is a process of continuous social construction through re-negotiating 'my' and/or 'our' values, truths, interests versus those of the 'other' and/or 'others'**.¹⁰ We also took into account the complexity of the identity issue from a political point of view. Identities are usually contested and associated with conflictness, they generate a need for a '**policy of identity**'.¹¹ Firstly, because common identity efforts can be transformed into collective struggles. Secondly, because it is a matter of recognition, legitimacy and power. Thirdly, because answers from other people, groups, organizations, including states and international organizations are required. That is why, identity policy has become one of the most discussed and broadly implemented policies of our time. From this point of view research project BRAINS alert for the need for cross-border identity policy to be adopted in the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region and sets a stepping stone with the introduction of a name for the region, **ROBULNA (Romanian-Bulgarian Neighbourhood Area)**. Next methodology issue was the question of measuring identity. Different methods are used in research projects. We chose surveys, thus, asking directly respondents about perceptions, values, opinions, relations and practices, that impact their identities. We considered three types of communities. Political communities are represented by political actors, involved in the subnational level of governance. They are significant, because they are expected to contribute to the consensus for the vision of a favourable

¹⁰ Kornazheva, M. (2010), Language Policy - a Factor of Security in European Cross-border Cooperation. PhD Dissertation, Ruse, 2010, p. 89-110.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 211.

change in the profile of the cross-border region. It is of utmost importance to realize how these communities imagine the region in a long-term perspective, do they assume a **potential for an integrated cross-border political identity (common vision and goals)**. The next target group was the socio-economic communities represented by economic actors and entrepreneurs. They are expected to ensure the tools for implementing the political vision for a favourable change in the profile of the cross-border region, namely, social solidarity and economic resources. In this respect the second most importance task of the research is related to the identification of **potential for integrated cross-border socio-economic identity (common resources to meet the goals)**. Cultural communities are represented by citizens. Just like corporate culture, regional culture is both a prerequisite for and a consequence from change¹². It is the integrated self-knowledge about the region without which a new development take-off is impossible. Culture is a container of values, a mix of beliefs, taboos, symbols, and myths, emanation of what is most significant for us. Therefore, establishing the potential for **integrated cross-border cultural identity (common rituals and other practices)** was the third research task. From a statistical point of view, we derived data through a 4000-respondents survey from the Romanian - Bulgarian cross-border region (2200 Romanians and 1800 Bulgarians distributed in above mentioned three target groups).

Some findings about the potential for an integrated cross-border identity of the Romanian-Bulgarian Cross-Border Region according to politicians and public administration. Romanian point of view: More than half of the interviewed respondents in Romania have totally agreed that county and local public administrations have enough competences to strengthen regional development and cross-border cooperation. More than one fourth of respondents claim, that they maintain occasionally relations with Bulgarian districts of ROBULNA. More than 40% intend to establish relations with partners from Bulgarian districts. Results show the important role agriculture can have in the development of cross-border cooperation. Over 70% of the interviewed have mentioned this sector for having a special potential for development. Over 65% of the respondents think, that local public administration can strengthen cross-border cooperation and thus raise the profile of ROBULNA. The main barriers to cross-border cooperation are lack

¹² See Definition of Corporate Culture by Debra Thorsen //<<http://ezinearticles.com/?Definition-of-Corporate-Culture&id=99997>>. The author is an expert in corporate culture. Her 20-year practice made her believe, that culture is an energy field, which charges people and impacts their way of thinking. It is this energy, that attracts people to a common identity. This energy emerges, when people are brought together in their strive for a common goal.

of knowledge regarding the political and legal environment across the border; difficult access (e.g. underdeveloped road infrastructure); national regulation and application of legal norms. We must note, that cultural differences between the two societies do not represent a negative factor. The creation of the regional brand ROBULNA is viewed as a positive initiative with potential to provide economic and social advantages.

Some findings about the potential for an integrated cross-border identity of the Romanian-Bulgarian Cross-Border Region according to politicians and public administration. Bulgarian point of view: Over 80% of the Bulgarian respondents think that sub-national levels of governance have sufficient powers to make regional policies and to strengthen cross-border cooperation. 58% of the respondents are willing to cooperate with potential partners across the border. Sectors which respondents consider with the highest potential for cross-border cooperation are tourism (23%), transport and communications (14%), agriculture (12%). Respondents consider, that the most serious obstacles to cross-border cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria are the language barrier (44%) and the different laws, that regulate both economies (33%). Most respondents (42%) believe that cultural differences (values and behaviors) are not an obstacle to cooperation between the neighboring countries. As for ROBULNA brand respondents were united around the idea that it will lead to recognition of the regional attractiveness and potential (60%). In terms of distinctive features and strengths of the Bulgarian-Romanian border region, respondents achieved almost complete unanimity. 68% of respondents expressed strong agreement that ROBULNA should emphasize the geopolitical situation of the region as a bridge between the Black Sea and Central Europe. In addition, nearly 90% believe it should emphasize the importance of the Danube as a major pan-European transport corridor connecting all areas in between ROBULNA and 8 more European countries.

Some findings about the potential for an integrated cross-border identity of the Romanian-Bulgarian Cross-Border Region according to economic actors. Romanian point of view: About 7% of the respondents claim to have business relations with partners from the Bulgarian part of ROBULNA. 37% of the respondents have intentions to increase activity in Bulgarian districts of ROBULNA. These intentions are useful for the future development of ROBULNA brand and for the future economic development of the area of both countries implied. Main possibilities of economic collaboration are seen especially in agriculture, a sector mentioned by 60,8% of the respondents. The main barriers regarding collaboration between Romanian and Bulgarian enterprises is related

to the lack of information. Romanian managers are not aware about Bulgarian legislation, facilities, business environment. According to the respondents the promotion of ROBULNA brand could help for the recognition of its attractiveness and potential, for the planning of appropriate development strategy, could enhance cross-border business relations and increase visibility of the region in Europe and worldwide. Each of the mentioned benefits was mentioned by at least 88,7% of the respondents.

Some findings about the potential for an integrated cross-border identity of the Romanian-Bulgarian Cross-Border Region according to economic actors. Bulgarian point of view: Approximately 15% of the respondents confirmed, that they had business relations with Romanian partners, and 7% did so regularly. More than 40% intend to develop relations with Romanian partners from ROBULNA. Sectors with the highest potential for cooperatoin were assessed trade, tourism, agriculture and forestry. The main obstacle for the development of cross-border business relations is the lack of information on the environment in Romania - both in its business aspects (such as market structure, networks or suppliers, distributors and potential clients) and in its legal, political and administrative aspects. Approximately 90% of the respondents pointed out that not knowing the environment was the biggest obstacle, and more than 50% were definitive about that. Only 8% of the respondents considered cultural differences an obstacle.

Some findings about the potential for an integrated cross-border identity of the Romanian-Bulgarian Cross-Border Region according to citizens. Romanian point of view: When asked the questions 'What would you say about yourself, who are you, how do you identify yourself?' 90% of Romanian respondents hesitate between citizens of the town/village where they live, and citizens of their country. About 70% of them see themselves as citizens of the world. On the question 'Do you maintain/intend to establish formal/informal relations with persons from with person from Bulgarian districts of ROBULNA, Bulgaria as whole, other EU countries, outside EU?' Romanian respondents claim, that about 5% to 8% maintain formal and informal relations with Bulgarians, and about 16% intend to get involved into cross-border relations. Barriers for the Romanian citizens from ROBUNA are determined by financial aspects, language, insufficient facilities to cross the river and lacking promotion regarding the attractiveness of the Bulgarian area.

Some findings about the potential for an integrated cross-border identity of the Romanian-Bulgarian Cross-Border Region according to citizens. Bulgarian point of view: The highest percentage of the Bulgarian respondents (86,77 %) defined themselves mainly as citizens of their country. The locality

they belong rank second in importance - 82 % of the responses. 37% view themselves as citizens of the world. As for official and individual inter-personal contacts between Bulgarians and Romanians within the cross-border region, they are at its initial phase, from 9,6 % to 17,45 % of respondents confirm they maintain relations with Romanians. The picture changes concerning the intentions for such contacts, respectively 21,01 % in favour of the official contacts and 38,29 % in favour of friendly contacts. Bulgarian respondents consider, that lack of competence on the neighbor language is the main barrier for cross-border cooperation.

Conclusions

Project BRAINS is innovative. Applied study of the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region from such a perspective and with such effects has not been undertaken so far. For the first time the exploration of public opinion on the most salient assets of the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region is positioned as a basis for construction of cross-border identity. For the first time the branding of the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region is proposed on the grounds of research findings and within a bottom-up approach. It is not streamlined by political elites of the national centers, but by academics, regional public opinion leaders, sub-national level public servants and representatives of regional civil society. The main research finding is a source of optimism: **no borderers can be said to exist in the Bulgarian-Romanian cross-border region, but there is a potential for the construction of a cross-border identity**. This finding opens windows of opportunities for cross-border identity policy as a milestone for strengthening the multi-level governance of ROBULNA, one of the cross-border cooperation regions of the European Union.