

## 2023

# ANALYSIS

of the current State of  
**Cross-border Cooperation for  
Youth Employability and  
Entrepreneurship**



НАЦИОНАЛНА АГЕНЦИЈА  
ЗА ЕВРОПСКИ ОБРАЗОВНИ  
ПРОГРАМИ И МОБИЛНОСТ



Erasmus+



# TABLE OF CONTENT

---

- 01** Introduction
- 03** Methodological Approach
- 05** History of cooperation, cross-border cooperation as a concept & opportunity that border regions have
- 09** State of cooperation between North Macedonia, Greece, and Bulgaria
  - 09** In-depth interviews
    - 09** North Macedonia
    - 13** Bulgaria
    - 18** Greece
  - 22** Focus groups
    - 22** North Macedonia
    - 24** Bulgaria
    - 28** Greece
  - 30** Desk research
- 34** Conclusions and recommendations for future action


# INTRODUCTION

01

This research report is created through the project “YouthDigiCoop for Youth Employability” supported by the Erasmus+ scheme and implemented by Youth Alliance from North Macedonia in partnership with SEE in Action from Greece and Step Forward from Bulgaria.

This document is based on the project activity to collect relevant data and insights into the cross-border cooperation between North Macedonia, Greece, and Bulgaria. The main aim of this research report is to put in one place all the needed information for the implementation of the project research activity. The two **main aims of the research are to define the baseline of the current state of cooperation in the border region of the three countries, mainly by targeting businesses (enterprises), educational institutions, municipalities, and youth organizations, as well as youth in general about the current state of play on cooperation in the border region.** By doing that, the project seeks to develop a platform for cooperation between the three countries and give more opportunities for young people in the border regions of the three states.

The document will give, you the readers, a detailed overview of the steps needed to achieve two things: first to gather information about the businesses (enterprises), educational institutions, organizations, and youth organizations and their field of work and opportunities for cooperation that will be publicly available on the digital platform of the project. Secondly, to create a report on the main findings of the current affairs on cooperation, the opportunities for young people from the border region to engage in the labor market, and opportunities for self-employment for young people. This was done by a set of steps implemented by the project partners, collection and publication of data, and analysis and writing of the research report.



The essence of this research report is to give an overview of the status of cross-border cooperations between North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece, especially through the eyes and spirit of potentials that are being unused.

Having in mind the positive European examples from the present and the past, the questions we are trying to answer with this report are multifold. Firstly, what is the legal and political background for the current state of cooperation between the countries? Secondly, what are the current areas of cooperation between the countries? Thirdly, which is the perception of key stakeholders (civil society organizations, educational institutions, business sector) in terms of cooperation. Lastly, which are the mechanisms that can be further developed to use cross-border cooperation as a driving tool to mitigate and facilitate measures for entrepreneurship and youth unemployment in the countries.

# METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

02

For this report, the project team and the designated researcher drafted a methodological plan for the collection of two types of data. Firstly, the project team engaged in a desk research period where relevant policies and laws were collected and analyzed. This gave the project team the needed overview in terms of the different approaches by the countries concerning cooperation in the wider sense of understanding. For instance, since Greece and Bulgaria are part of the European Union, their citizens have the freedom of movement and easier access to each other's institutions and permits to stay or work. In the case of North Macedonia, the law does not make a difference from where the "foreigners"[1] come from.



Furthermore, the project team collected and analyzed secondary data for Erasmus+ projects implemented in the three countries in the period between 2014 and 2022[2] and IPA cross-border projects which are available to North Macedonia and Bulgaria or Greece[3]. However, since Greece and Bulgaria are members of the European Union, these IPA funds are only available in cooperation with North Macedonia, and not between Greece and Bulgaria independently. Greece and Bulgaria on the other hand have access to other European Union funds which are specifically designed for EU member states. Additionally, the report takes a closer look at the history and political situation from the near past, as a (possible) important aspect of today's levels of cooperation.

---

[1] In this case, the law in North Macedonia treats foreigners as people who do not have citizenship of North Macedonia.

[2] The Erasmus+ data base of projects, available here: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects>

[3] IPA stands for Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/instrument-pre-accession-assistance-ipa-iii-performance\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/instrument-pre-accession-assistance-ipa-iii-performance_en)



Secondly, the project team and the designated researcher created the plan for primary data collection from key stakeholders from educational institutions, civil society organizations, business representatives, and municipal institutions. Two types of data collection tools were used:

1. **In-depth interview** through a questionnaire and
2. **Focus groups** for civil society organizations with a pre-prepared scenario that served as a validation of narratives and experiences.

In total 5 focus groups were held and a total of 41 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

The in-depth interviews were designed with a semi-structured interview approach, with a variation of questions depending on the views of the respondents. A total of 40 questions were designed, with each respondent depending on their views and experience answering appropriate questions. In total each respondent received at most 24 questions, out of which seven were demographics questions which were a key metric. Furthermore, the in-depth interviews were specifically designed for three types of respondents:

1. Representatives of **academia** and **educational institutions**;
2. Representatives of the **business sector**;
3. Representatives of **municipalities** from the cross-border region.

On the other hand, the focus groups were conducted through a structured scenario process which included 15 open-ended questions. The respondents were advised that the main aim of the focus group is not to have a joint opinion and/or agreement on each of the questions, but rather have an open discussion about their experiences and opinions. The primary focus of respondents for the focus groups included representatives from youth organizations (civil society organizations) and other non-state representatives.

## HISTORY OF COOPERATION, CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION AS A CONCEPT & OPPORTUNITY THAT BORDER REGIONS HAVE

# 03

### ***“Borders are scars on the face of the earth” [4]***

If we take this statement as true, then there are a lot of scars on the Balkan peninsula. Yet these scars are a relatively new concept, especially on the territories where North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece are. For centuries, all three countries were part of the Ottoman Empire, having no borders, and thus no “cross-border” cooperation in that sense. Having that in mind, the communities of today’s North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece lived in the same country, cooperating within the same system in terms of institutions and interconnectivity between the communities. These connections between the communities, and especially the movement of people are still visible today. For instance, the former mayor of Thessaloniki from 2011 until 2019 Yannis Boutaris has his family roots in today’s North Macedonia (Krushevo) through his mother’s ancestry.[5] The case of cooperation between Bulgarian and Macedonian communities is even more enhanced by the similarities of the South Slavic languages both communities spoke and spoke until this day. For instance, Ss. Cyril and Methodius Bulgarian Men's High School of Thessaloniki during the Ottoman times served as an educational hub for Macedonians and Bulgarians[6].

Having said the above-mentioned “positive” examples, one must keep in mind during the nation-building process all three countries have used different narratives to differentiate their community from the “rest”, which is a common practice in the region.

---

[4] “Enlargement of the European Union and the Wider European Perspective as Regards its Polycentric Spatial Structure” ESPON project 1.1.3, Second Interim Report, 2004, available at <http://www.espon.eu>

[5] “Cosmopolitan visionary – Boutaris and Thessaloniki” European Stability Initiative, published 12.10.2014 available here <https://www.esiweb.org/rumeliobserver/2014/10/12/cosmopolitan-visionary-boutaris-and-thessaloniki/>

[6] “The education race for Macedonia, 1878-1903” Julian Brooks, p15.

In that sense, with the fall of communism/socialism in the Balkans, old and historic wounds have been opened which caused political turmoil up until today[7]. Building on these interests of the countries, rather than on the positive examples gave way to a polarized environment for cooperation and policy.

However, although the history and anthropology of the communities and countries are important for the context, we are not going to go in-depth into the various political issues between the countries. Moreover, the point of giving the brought context is to give an overview that, at least for the three countries, borders are a relatively new concept that was introduced in the early 20th century, starting with the independence of each of the countries.[8]

In more recent history, and notable to this research and the cooperation is the fact that both Greece[9] and Bulgaria[10] are full members of the European Union, while North Macedonia has been a candidate country for the European Union since 2005[11]. Being a member of the European Union makes cooperation, the flow of products, trade, and the movement of people a lot easier since it lessens the bureaucratic burden on citizens, businesses, and institutions. This comes from the alignment of the laws, aligned taxation, and openness of the market which the European Union brings for its member states.

---

[7] Dr. Yorgos Christidis, "North Macedonia. After Greece, Bulgaria Appears. North Macedonia's Obstacle Course to Enter the EU", IEMed yearbook of 2022, available <https://www.iemed.org/publication/north-macedonia-after-greece-bulgaria-appears-north-macedonias-obstacle-course-to-enter-the-eu/>.

[8] Greece was the first of the three to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1831, however, the northern part of Greece called Macedonia was integrated into Greece in 1913. Bulgaria gained independence in 1908 from the Ottoman Empire. North Macedonia never gained independence as a country and was part of Bulgaria, Kingdom of Serbia, Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It gained independence in 1991.

[9] Greece joined the European Union in 1981 [https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/country-profiles/greece\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/country-profiles/greece_en)

[10] Bulgaria joined in 2007 [https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/country-profiles/bulgaria\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/country-profiles/bulgaria_en)

[11] North Macedonia country profile [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/north-macedonia\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/north-macedonia_en)



Having the borders in mind, North Macedonia and Bulgaria share a 148 km land border to Bulgaria's west/to North Macedonia's west, which has three border crossings. There are no train connections connecting the two countries; however, plans for building the railroad network have been a priority for both countries for the past decade.[12] Bulgaria and Greece share a border of 493 km, with six border crossings. There are also two train connections going from and to Bulgaria and Greece, which enable freight trains. Greece and North Macedonia share a border of 262 km with three border crossings. Two of these crossings also facilitate rail transportation between passengers and freight trains, which provides a connection to the port of Thessaloniki.

Although we are not concentrating on the trade between the countries as such, it is important to note the figures behind them, as they show the development of the country and business cooperation. In those terms, the latest data from 2021 shows that Greece exports 1.84 billion dollars worth of products to North Macedonia, while North Macedonia exports 289 million worth of products to Greece[13]. When it comes to the trade between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, North Macedonia exported 405 million dollars worth of products to Bulgaria in 2021. On the other hand, Bulgaria exports 629 million dollars worth of products to North Macedonia.[14] Lastly, looking at the data available for trade between Greece and Bulgaria, Greece exports 3.48 billion dollars worth of products to Bulgaria, while Bulgaria exports 3.55 billion dollars worth of products to Greece.[15]



---

[12] "The construction of a railway section between North Macedonia and Bulgaria has been launched", Novinite.com agency published on 30.10.2022 <https://www.novinite.com/articles/217296/The+Construction+of+a+Railway+Section+between+North+Macedonia+and+Bulgaria+has+been+Launched>

[13] The Observatory of Economic Complexity, trade between Greece and North Macedonia <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/grc/partner/mkd>

[14] The Observatory of Economic Complexity, trade between Bulgaria and North Macedonia <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/bgr/partner/mkd>

[15] The Observatory of Economic Complexity, trade between Bulgaria and Greece <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/grc/partner/bgr>



Seeing such figures brings us to two conclusions. First, North Macedonia is the smallest country out of the three and has the smallest economy of the three analyzed countries, thus the high values of imports, and low levels of exports to the neighboring countries. Secondly, being a full member of the European Union and the single market enables greater economic cooperation, especially when it comes to trade between two member states.

Having all that in mind, cooperation, at least historically and economically, has been an important aspect for the three countries as such. Yet, cross-border cooperation is a relatively new concept, in mind that the first official funds available for member countries of the European Union when it comes to the development of border region cooperation/cross-border cooperation launched in 1990[16]. Although cross-border cooperation existed bilaterally between the specific countries even before the launch of Interreg, the program was the first of its kind in terms of the wider political view of the need to develop a cross-border region on the continent.

On the other hand, the cross-border regions in all three countries are among the poorest in Europe and the European Union[17]. Hence the question, what is the current situation and what are the opportunities for further development of cross-border cooperation, especially in terms of youth employment and entrepreneurship?

For this report, we took a closer look at the programs available for cooperation and specifically cross-border projects, which are financed by the European Union. The three main pillars for such projects and activities are the Erasmus+ program, Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA, which is relevant for North Macedonia since the cross-border projects are allocated there), and Interreg which provides funds for border regions that are already in the European Union.

---

[16] Interreg 30 years, [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/30-years\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/30-years_en)

[17] GreekReporter, news outlet, published in February 2019, available here <https://greekreporter.com/2019/02/26/four-regions-in-greece-named-among-europes-poorest/>

# STATE OF COOPERATION BETWEEN NORTH MACEDONIA, GREECE, AND BULGARIA

## 04

### ***“Business does not recognize borders”[18]***

This statement is insofar true if there were no actual barriers to cooperation, however, from the interviews in all countries we can conclude that there are barriers, yet the border is the least of concern for the interviewed people.

In this section of the report, we will take a closer look at the results gathered from the deep interviews and focus groups conducted with individuals from educational institutions, state/municipal institutions, and representatives from the business sector.


## **In-depth Interviews**

### **North Macedonia**

Participants in the discussion generally expressed positive views about regional cooperation between North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece. There is an increasing level of active cooperation with Greece, particularly in areas where they have joined efforts. The Bulgarian side was seen as more responsive, though the cooperation with Bulgaria was noted to be somewhat cyclical. Despite political tensions, individual-level cooperation was not seen as a problem, and there have been successful bilateral and trilateral collaborations. Projects like a fintech hackathon involving Greece and Bulgaria have provided benefits, and overall, participants believe that while challenges exist, the cooperation is gradually improving and there is ongoing effort to address common important issues.

---

[18] One of the interviews from the business sector from North Macedonia





Moreover, the participants discussed various possibilities for cooperation, including the exchange of technologies, knowledge, and educational opportunities. They emphasized the importance of overcoming the fear of the unknown and creating a platform for open expression. Benefits of cooperation were identified, such as extended project outcomes, raising awareness, showcasing collaboration despite political tensions, and adopting successful practices from other countries.

The risks associated with collaboration were also highlighted, including political tensions, language barriers, geopolitical situations, and the impact of the pandemic on partnerships. The need for a common space for free expression and cooperation beyond political viewpoints was emphasized, despite challenges and budget limitations.

In assessing North Macedonia's relations with Greece, participants rated these ties on a scale of one to five, reflecting poor to good. Participants representing the universities averaged a score of 3.13, with the scores ranging from 2 to 4.5. While no significant cooperation issues were identified, some prejudices and changing individual perceptions were discussed. Personal experiences could influence higher ratings. Interestingly, the business sector and municipalities were awarded a top rating of 5, demonstrating a positive view of these relations.

Similarly, the evaluation of Bulgaria's relations with North Macedonia yielded an average score of 1.88. Scores given from the universities ranged from 1 to 3, attributed to factors like political tensions and complex communication. The business sector showed a more hopeful perspective with an average score of 3, citing reasons like geographical distance, political climate, and pandemic disruptions for their scores.

Furthermore, when asked about institutional cooperation with North Macedonia and Greece, the participants generally responded positively, revealing a history of engagement for diverse purposes such as projects, student exchanges, fairs, and the exchange of experiences and knowledge.





Regarding designated staff responsible for cooperation with both countries, there was an even distribution between those who confirmed they had such staff and those who did not. However, when it came to the presence of staff members from either country within the institution, the majority indicated that their institution did not host such individuals.

Collaboration with legal entities, companies, parties, and universities from North Macedonia and Greece was motivated by diverse factors spanning multiple sectors. Within the university sector, cooperation encompassed joint academic endeavors, scientific exploration, and conference participation. Collaboration with chambers aimed at enhancing communication and networking, addressing workforce development concerns. Similarities in socio-cultural predispositions facilitated cooperation, as did shared mentalities and common interests, fostering progress and innovative ideas. In the municipality sector, the focus was on leveraging shared elements to overcome challenges. The business sector's incentives included language presentation, academic cooperation, and student placement, underscored by the need for practical collaboration and project mobility.

The impact of cooperation on both the business sector and universities was predominantly positive, with participants noting several beneficial outcomes. Collaborative efforts led to joint learning and the exchange of local experiences, often formalized through the signing of memoranda of cooperation. However, some participants mentioned certain limitations in terms of project scope and overall impact. For instance, a portion of the staff's involvement and the resulting impact were perceived as limited. It is also interesting to note that in the context of universities, some students do not view Greece as a prominent destination for Erasmus exchanges or postgraduate studies which was listed as a reason contributing to the limited impact of cooperation.



Furthermore, a very small number of participants indicated that their businesses require skilled young workers and are open to hiring from the other two countries. However, this sentiment was not universally shared.



Concerns were raised about the intricacies of securing jobs for residents, let alone those coming from other countries. Additionally, some mentioned the issue of an ongoing staff outflow without a significant inflow of new talent. Nonetheless, discussions about importing labor to address workforce deficits have been underway for some time according to them.

Moreover, the participants, representing universities, acknowledged limited student presence from Bulgaria and Greece, with the Erasmus programs and meetings in place but lacking effective execution. Some participants cited minimal student exchanges and perceived other locations as more attractive within the Erasmus framework. Scholarships for students from Greece and Bulgaria were generally lacking, with some Erasmus scholarships available but no specific ones tailored to these countries. One participant mentioned a presidential scholarship for post-graduate studies, and the discontinuation of scholarships for Greek citizens was noted since before COVID-19.

In the end, when asked about the future of cooperation, participants showed to be holding positive views about the future of cooperation between the countries but emphasized that more efforts are required for its enhancement. Breaking down barriers and addressing sensitive issues openly were considered key steps for advancing cooperation. Positive prospects for cooperation with Greece were foreseen, and although challenges exist in cooperation with Bulgaria due to political conflicts, there's optimism for improvement. It is interesting to note that the Open Balkans initiative was mentioned as a model that offers opportunities to learn from successful practices. On the other hand, the Open Balkans initiative might redirect businesses to those countries, potentially impacting cooperation with Greece and Bulgaria as they do not participate in the initiative as was mentioned by one of the participants. The aim is to ensure ease of cooperation and communication with all neighboring countries and to capitalize on opportunities, including those for startup scene development.




Common challenges among the three societies included historical issues that were seen as potentially unresolvable, but business was recognized as transcending these barriers. Unemployment, emigration, brain drain, and low wages were shared problems that were identified. Overcoming initial misunderstandings and fostering national identity within the context of neighboring countries was considered essential. There was a desire for increased cooperation with Bulgaria to address common issues and change the discourse.

Additionally, mentality emerged as a major developmental hurdle, requiring collaborative efforts for change. The nostrification of the diplomas process and political tensions were considered challenges that could be tackled through cooperation, especially with the involvement of the business sector. Preventing brain drain to Western Europe by offering opportunities and cooperation was seen to retain talent locally. Addressing emigration was seen as paramount, and there was interest in creating a mechanism to retain young people and provide opportunities. Considering all these fields that can be improved through cooperation, it was interesting to note that the majority of the participants stated they or their institution are planning or are actively working on establishing cooperation with their neighbors from Bulgaria and Greece.



## **Bulgaria**

When asked about the regional cooperation between North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece, the majority of participants shared the perspective that it is challenging or rather “difficult”. While some deemed it difficult but not insurmountable, others noted that the cooperation has been notably positive with Greece but less so with North Macedonia. A few participants expressed that the situation is very challenging, citing strained political relationships between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, as well as negative opinions toward North Macedonia in general. One participant highlighted that cooperation appears to be more fruitful with Greece in comparison to North Macedonia.





In terms of cooperation possibilities, both the business and university sectors concur that exchanging practices and experiences, as well as cross-border collaboration, are viable options. The majority of participants conveyed a positive sentiment, asserting the presence of numerous opportunities. From a business perspective, economic collaboration and exchange of experiences were highlighted, alongside potential in culture, agriculture, and defense.

Similarly, the education sector emphasized the significance of cross-border cooperation, exchange of best practices, and mobility programs. Opportunities were cited in fields such as tourism, economy, defense, and cultural exchange. The potential for Erasmus programs related to Greece and North Macedonia was also noted, as well as the exchange of students and teachers, scientific and educational collaboration, and student attraction. Additionally, it was interesting to see that across sectors, business, university, and municipality, they all stated they believe there are benefits to cooperation as it stimulates learning a foreign language, exchanging cooperation, as well as development, enrichment, and exchange of know-how.

When considering collaboration risks, participants shared diverse viewpoints. Some individuals expressed uncertainty or avoided specifying risks, while others indicated potential risks without elaboration. Ethnic confrontation was highlighted as a risk by one participant, while another noted that early education might contribute to negative attitudes between certain groups (Macedonians learning to cultivate hate towards Bulgarians/Greeks). The importance of changing perspectives to foster positive relations was emphasized. Neglecting one party, policy, and regulatory challenges, as well as potential hostility, were also mentioned as risks. Some respondents, however, believed there were no risks.

Furthermore, discussing levels of cooperation showed intriguing results. The cooperation difficulties are perceived differently by participants about North Macedonia and Greece. Some individuals expressed that cooperation with North Macedonia is more challenging due to historical problems, strong nationalism, negative attitudes, and political tensions.






Recent cases of attacks on Bulgarian cultural institutions and a negative political mood were also mentioned as factors. On the other hand, cooperation challenges with Greece were less frequently cited. Some respondents couldn't judge or offer vague feelings, while others noted that ironing out differences requires a mutual desire for cooperation.

On a scale of one to five, where one signifies very bad and five represents very good, participants were asked to rate the relations between Bulgaria and Greece and Bulgaria and North Macedonia. In the business sector, the average score for Bulgaria-Greece relations was 4.17, attributed to ease of collaboration, personal preferences, lack of problems, and the appeal of Greece as a destination. Meanwhile, the Bulgaria-North Macedonia score in the same sector was 2.33, reflecting deeply ingrained animosities, differences, perceived tension, political challenges, and media portrayal issues. In the university sector, Bulgaria-Greece scored 3.69, with factors like EU membership, diplomatic ties, economic links, and historical significance mentioned. Conversely, Bulgaria-North Macedonia received an average score of 2.58, citing personal experiences, political tensions, nationalist sentiments, and exchange difficulties. Municipalities gave Bulgaria-Greece a score of 4, appreciating their shared EU membership, while Bulgaria-North Macedonia received a score of 2, indicating ongoing challenges in their relationship.

Furthermore, in the business sector, almost all the participants affirmed the presence of staff responsible for cooperation with both countries, while 1/4 did not. In the university sector, 66.7% of participants confirmed the presence of such staff, 33.3% responded negatively, and some were unsure. Within the municipality sector, all participants stated the existence of staff responsible for cooperation. However, when it came to staff coming from other countries, their numbers were small despite the large percentage of staff mentioned in the previous answers responsible for working on cooperation. Concerning staff from either country, 18.2% of participants in the business sector said yes, while 81.8% said no. In the education sector, 21.4% reported having staff from either country, 71.4% responded negatively, and some were unsure.





Similarly, within the municipality sector, there was confirmation of having staff from either country, with one participant mentioning a lengthy and complex process.

The reasons for cooperating with legal entities, companies, parties, and universities from North Macedonia and Greece vary across sectors. In the business sector, the motivations include profit, business opportunities, geographical proximity, and work-related collaboration. The university sector emphasizes scientific exchange, practical benefits, and the enhancement of qualifications through exchanges, conferences, and joint projects. Additionally, the sentiment of being brotherly nations contributes to cooperation in the university sector. Municipalities engage in traditional cooperation activities, often funded by the EU, which involve joint events, festivals, trainings, and forums aimed at enhancing accessibility to tourism and infrastructural development. The common thread among these sectors is the pursuit of mutual benefit, economic development, and improved relations between neighboring countries.

In both the business and university sectors, the majority of participants highlighted positive effects resulting from cooperation, such as revenue increase, relationship building, business development, and experience gains. The university sector emphasized valuable international experiences and conclusions drawn from studies. While some reported no effect due to project duration or specific programs, the general sentiment remained positive. Similarly, in the municipality sector, the positive impacts of cooperation were evident through the adoption of good practices and positive opinions among involved parties.

In the business sector, a majority expressed a need for skilled young workers and openness to employees from other countries. The sentiment was that qualified individuals are essential for businesses to operate effectively, and cross-border exchanges are often aimed at training personnel in specific areas. On the other hand, in the university sector, the majority indicated that their institutions do not require skilled young workers from the neighboring countries.





Interestingly, despite cooperation with neighboring countries, many participants felt that such collaboration did not significantly contribute to job creation for young people, except for the municipality sector.

When the university representatives were asked about student numbers, they replied positively stating they did have students coming from both countries, or just one of them. The range of students they hosted was from 4 to “about 100”. Regarding scholarships, the majority of respondents indicated that the university does offer scholarships for international students from Greece and/or North Macedonia. However, specific details about the admission procedure were not provided in the responses.

In the last section of the interview, in the business sector, the views on the future of cooperation range from seeing it as real, positive, normal, and helpful despite some difficulties, to the expectation of further development. In the university sector, participants foresee a future of greater exchange, positive development, and successful cooperation, with an emphasis on strengthening processes and fostering improved relations through student acceptance and more national-level projects. In the municipality sector, the sentiment is that the future holds the potential for even better cooperation. Despite the somewhat negative views on the current state of cooperation, there is an overarching optimism for a brighter and more productive collaborative future between the countries.

In the business sector, the majority indicated a negative opinion and stated that there are no common problems that could be solved through collaboration. However, some mentioned inflation as a potential issue. In the university sector, there was a general sense of pessimism, with some identifying historical problems that may not be recognized by young people. Nevertheless, those with positive views saw potential in addressing problems related to tourism and border topics through activities such as visiting cultural institutions and improving dialogue between nations.




In the municipality sector, the sentiment was uncertain, and the majority indicated that there were no common problems that could be solved through collaboration. In the final responses, when asked whether young people can benefit from such cooperation, nearly every interviewee expressed optimism and answered affirmatively, indicating that they believe young people can indeed benefit from such collaborative efforts.



## Greece

In terms of regional cooperation between North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece, participants across sectors generally displayed a positive outlook. In the university sector, there was mention of positive developments, including the normalization of relations with North Macedonia, deepening ties with Bulgaria across various fields, and the potential of political dynamics impacting cooperation. Another participant expressed overall positive sentiment and emphasized the absence of problems in cooperation with both Bulgaria and North Macedonia, both personally and academically. The business sector also held a satisfactory view of the cooperation, highlighting benefits such as tax systems in Bulgaria and the exchange of experience, while acknowledging language barriers as a challenge. Cooperation with institutions from Bulgaria was noted to be improving, while experiences with North Macedonia were described as limited. In the municipality sector, the cooperation was deemed fairly good, particularly among cities and organizations participating in Territorial Cooperation programs.

The benefits of cooperation were positively acknowledged across different sectors. In the university realm, participants highlighted substantial advantages spanning energy, business, culture, and education, emphasizing the absence of drawbacks and only positive outcomes from collaboration. In the business sector, benefits were underscored as stemming from networking and the exchange of knowledge and expertise.




Similarly, in the municipality sector, the advantages of cooperation were recognized in addressing common challenges in cross-border regions, albeit alongside acknowledged challenges linked to differing legal statuses of the participating countries.

Nevertheless, cooperation difficulties were identified in relation to North Macedonia due to past issues affecting political will and capitalization on agreements, with lingering negative perceptions impacting the agreement's reception. Conversely, cooperation with Greece was generally viewed positively, noting excellent collaboration. The complexity of cooperation with North Macedonia was attributed to interlinked political will and challenges in practical implementation despite progress in theory.

On a scale of one to five, where one represents very bad and five signifies very good, the participants' ratings for the relations between Greece and its neighboring countries varied across sectors. In the university sector, the average score for Greece's relations with Bulgaria was 4.75. Participants described the relationship as generally good and expressed optimism for potential improvement over time, despite historical challenges. Some indicated a score of 5, highlighting willingness and actual collaboration opportunities. In the business sector, the average score was 3.33, with language barriers and mutual interest in cooperation influencing the responses. In the municipality sector, a score of 5 was given, describing excellent cooperation with institutions after EU entry. Regarding Greece's relations with North Macedonia, the university sector awarded an average score of 3.5, expressing a desire for improvement post-Prespa Agreement and emphasizing the need for political will. The business sector gave a grade of 1, signifying nonexistent cooperation, while the municipality sector scored 5, highlighting excellent collaboration, especially after the Prespa Agreement.

When asked about their institutional cooperation, in response to the inquiry about cooperation with North Macedonia or Bulgaria, participants across sectors generally expressed positive experiences and ongoing collaborations, confirming they cooperated or plan to do so. In the university sector, respondents highlighted signed memoranda with





academic institutions from North Macedonia, as well as agreements with Bulgaria based on EU concepts, although student exchanges were noted to be limited. Additionally, university cooperation and Erasmus exchanges were emphasized as modes of interaction. The business sector affirmed cooperation through cross-border projects and participation in EU-co-funded programs with both countries. In the municipality sector, engagement was noted through Territorial Cooperation Programmes and joint funding to address shared issues.

The reasons for cooperating with legal entities, companies, parties, and universities from North Macedonia and Bulgaria showed diversity across sectors. In the university sector, the reasons included the internationalization of Greek universities and the Erasmus concept, as well as general cooperation. Networking opportunities were highlighted as a motive across all sectors. In terms of business and economic development, participants from different sectors also pointed to these reasons as drivers for cooperation.

In the university sector, opinions were divided regarding the presence of staff responsible for cooperation with both countries. However, in the business sector and municipality sector, there was unanimous agreement that there is no such designated staff. Regarding the presence of staff from either country in their institutions, the majority of those who affirmed having such staff specified that they were from Bulgaria rather than North Macedonia. The business sector and municipality sector shared unanimous responses, indicating the absence of staff from either country in their institutions.

The general sentiment expressed across sectors is that cooperation had a positive effect. In the university sector, participants noted a positive impact on the educational process and expressed the potential for further collaboration. In the business sector, the collaboration was seen as having a positive impact, but some respondents also mentioned the absence of job positions for young people as a limitation. In the municipality sector, the collaboration was seen as positive, particularly through territorial cooperation projects that led to the creation of mutually accessible sites. However, reasons for not cooperating included



issues like lack of funding and a lack of readiness to look outside the country for opportunities.

The university representatives confirmed that their universities have students from both North Macedonia and Bulgaria, although the number of students may vary. While there were occasional students from North Macedonia, more students were noted to come from Bulgaria, often participating in English-speaking Master's programs. However, some mentioned that the presence of North Macedonian students was limited and that not many students from North Macedonia were observed. As for scholarships for international students from Bulgaria and/or North Macedonia, the general sentiment was that there were no specific scholarships available or that the respondents were unaware of such scholarships.

Regarding the future of cooperation between the countries, participants expressed a positive outlook across the questioned sectors. In the university sector, there was an anticipation of new cooperation opportunities and a belief that cooperation would only improve, particularly with the EU playing a key role. Despite the optimism, some participants mentioned being cautious about potential challenges. In the business sector, the future was seen as very promising, especially in terms of ongoing cooperation with Bulgaria, while limited or no contacts were reported with North Macedonia. The importance of systematic and methodical efforts to establish effective cooperation was emphasized. Similarly, in the municipality sector, participants believed that overcoming political obstacles could lead to substantial cooperation through reciprocal diplomacy pursued by local authorities.

Participants from various sectors identified common problems that could potentially be addressed through increased collaboration among the three societies. In the university sector, concerns included brain drain, unemployment (particularly among the youth), insurance challenges, and broader issues stemming from neoliberal crises. Nationalism, corruption, lack of rule of law, environmental problems, organized crime, and migrant issues were also mentioned. The need for upgraded cross-border infrastructure was emphasized.



Similarly, in the business sector, the participants acknowledged shared problems arising from the Balkan countries' geostrategic positioning and their relatively weaker economies compared to Northern European countries. The municipality sector highlighted the common challenges faced by border societies, advocating for a collective approach to achieve economies of scale and ensure regional sustainability, reflecting on the historical context when borders were different or rather nonexistent.

In the end, the consensus was that young people could indeed benefit from such cooperation between countries. Regarding the future of cooperation between countries, the university sector had few positive intentions, while the majority of other respondents seemed to have no specific plans. The business sector displayed a mixed response, with some expressing openness to partnerships without concrete plans at the moment. In the municipality sector, ongoing debates and contacts were mentioned, focusing on the creation of joint proposals and the use of financial instruments to address common challenges faced by border societies, thus indicating a commitment to strengthening cooperation.





## **Focus Groups**

### **North Macedonia**

In a focus group discussion, participants offered insightful perspectives on the current state of cooperation between Bulgaria, Greece, and North Macedonia. The group acknowledged that varying levels of cooperation exist among these countries, with one being considered more pronounced than the others. They noted a disbalance in these collaborative efforts but recognized the presence of opportunities for engagement at different levels.

When reflecting on the broader cooperation among Macedonia, Greece, and Bulgaria, and identifying the main obstacles to such cooperation, participants outlined several key issues. Notably, there's a perceived language barrier with Greece, while interactions with Bulgaria were viewed as smoother due to geographical proximity.





Moreover, they expressed challenges in finding trustworthy partners, as some overstated their capabilities without possessing the necessary resources. Political hurdles and mistrust were also cited as obstacles, as were a lack of support for building cooperation, and the practical difficulty young people face when attempting to initiate cooperative projects.

In terms of the driving forces behind building bilateral or trilateral cooperation and fostering good-neighborly relations, participants stressed the significance of individual initiatives, advocating for proactive efforts rather than relying solely on institutions. In addition, they highlighted the role of youth activism in driving these endeavors forward.

When considering the impact of projects on the youth and whether such initiatives benefit the youth, participants expressed uncertainty about the direct benefits, particularly economic benefits. Instead, they suggested that these projects foster psycho-physical development, which in turn, plays a crucial role in the broader economic empowerment of young people.

Turning to the question of the benefits of cross-border cooperation among municipalities, companies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations, participants centered their focus on domestic concerns and demonstrated skepticism toward the potential benefits. Their skepticism stemmed from the challenges posed by an incompetent government that fails to provide necessary conditions, consequently distracting them from cooperation efforts as their attention is drawn to solving more urgent local and national issues.

Participants then shared their ongoing efforts in terms of cooperation between countries, ranging from diverse projects to seizing opportunities in Bulgaria and Greece. They encouraged independent initiative in uncovering and leveraging these opportunities and mentioned contributions to the creative sector through support for various organizations, art shows, and collaborations with schools and municipalities.


Finally, discussing measures to enhance cooperation, participants emphasized the need to address internal issues first, suggesting that creating a stable foundation at home would pave the way for more fruitful cooperative endeavors and beyond.

## **Bulgaria**

In the focus group centered on the theme of cross-border cooperation between Bulgaria, Greece, and North Macedonia, a diverse array of participants shared their perspectives on the current state, challenges, opportunities, and prospects of collaboration among these countries.

Participants concurred that the existing level of cooperation between these nations stands in contrast to the advanced collaborative efforts often seen in Western European contexts. Young individuals, serving as bridges of communication and intercultural exchange, emerged as focal points of cooperation. However, the discussion unveiled that divisions persist, largely due to radical viewpoints. The image of North Macedonia, as portrayed in the media, exacerbates tensions by highlighting conflicts. Moreover, participants emphasized that despite apparent media-driven strains, ordinary citizens generally perceive less friction. The tenor of cooperation differs when comparing the relations of Bulgaria with Greece and North Macedonia, with Greece garnering more favorable opinions. It is worth noting that shared goals and interests serve as cohesive elements, yet significant obstacles, such as external political influences and historical regional trauma, pose formidable challenges.

The participants collectively outlined several barriers to effective cross-border cooperation. A recurring concern was the lack of initiatives and information regarding collaborative ventures, leaving potential opportunities untapped. Economic cooperation, albeit present at a rudimentary level, grapples with intangible historical obstacles. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic further magnified vulnerabilities, compelling nations to embrace self-sufficiency. Inadequate infrastructure and a proclivity for self-reliance impede the seamless functioning of cross-border initiatives.





Additionally, participants pointed to ego and self-confidence as inhibiting factors, while external political influences and nationalist movements exert their sway. The weight of unhealed historical events and regional trauma adds complexity to the collaboration landscape, compounded by the challenge of underdeveloped civil societies.

The narrative of shared responsibility for cooperation emerged consistently throughout the discussions. The responsibility extends across various stakeholders, encompassing institutions, governments, NGOs, and individuals. Divergent relations between capital cities and border regions underscore that inequality exists in this shared responsibility. It was also highlighted that corporations, international organizations, and NGOs contribute to this multifaceted responsibility. A noteworthy observation was the absence of a dedicated institution specifically designed to foster cooperation. Despite this, the Foreign Ministry is recognized for its role, and the participants drew attention to initiatives like Erasmus+ projects that play a pivotal role in nurturing connections among the youth.

A comparative analysis of cross-border and general cooperation within the context of these three nations was undertaken by the participants and they underscored a few key dynamics. Cross-border collaboration, constrained by limited economic and transport connectivity, faces its unique set of challenges. Hierarchical cooperation, although present, pales in comparison to the potential for cross-border regions, owing to shared languages and cultures. Participants uniformly advocated for common solutions to address unresolved issues. This sentiment was further supported by the perceived benefits of EU accession, suggesting a belief in the potential benefits of a larger, cohesive entity.

A majority of participants viewed cooperation as a potential solution for the challenges faced by youth. They noted that cultural exchange could play a pivotal role in addressing these issues. The improvement of hiring procedures to bolster job opportunities and the preservation of peace through cultural exchanges were promoted as critical endeavors. Participants underscored the need for cooperation to be tailored to the needs of youth in border areas, addressing issues ranging from lack of




information to cultural prejudices. It was unanimously agreed that in-depth studies of young people's needs should provide the guiding compass for cooperation initiatives.

The deliberations substantiated the unanimous agreement that cross-border collaboration among municipalities, companies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations is intrinsically beneficial for the youth. Such collaborative efforts, spanning projects, internships, events, and Erasmus+ initiatives, are seen as ways for skill development and cross-cultural exchange. The necessity of identifying municipality-specific needs was accentuated, while cross-border projects and cultural interactions emerged as conduits to broadening perspectives and dismantling preconceptions.

Moreover, participants discussed their involvement in cross-border and general cooperation efforts between countries. Colleagues from the Greek office connect during organization holidays, fostering informal relationships. General conferences for international interns and a European conference are held throughout the year. Collaborative curriculum development, knowledge exchange, and experience-sharing among colleagues were highlighted. Notably, a participant authored a textbook that gained interest from North Macedonian colleagues due to its alignment with their educational approach. However, challenges were noted in business cooperation, with a company facing hurdles in working with North Macedonia due to high costs, legal restrictions, and infrastructural limitations, impacting product prices for end users.

The participants shared their experiences and personal feelings regarding their involvement in joint projects with Greece and North Macedonia. A project funded by "Europe for Citizens" took one participant to a Greek village, where they observed a certain arrogance from Greek representatives towards North Macedonians due to the name conflict. Language barriers occasionally posed challenges, with English serving as a crucial bridge for understanding. Another participant mentioned positive experiences assisting a Greek furniture producer, facilitated by English-Bulgarian communication. Language was not a barrier for some, and good feelings were expressed about



collaboration with both countries. Discrepancies arose with Greek workers' expectations and conditions offered. Language wasn't a barrier, and positive feelings emerged from collaborations, especially in projects like Erasmus+.

When it comes to the motivation of the participants for cooperation, it has a wide spectrum, including financial gains, intercultural exchange, peace preservation, and market expansion. Joint projects sought solutions transcending borders. Learning from neighbors and utilizing resources drove collaboration. Interpersonal relations, empathy, and expanded worldviews motivated others.

Furthermore, participants recommended involving municipalities, organizing events, and fostering positive perspectives. Recreational and innovative activities were encouraged. Joint cultural initiatives, sports, and concerts were seen as unifying tools. Shared activities and visions were underscored to fortify cooperation. Recognizing political changes and nurturing patience were advised. Additionally, advocacy for increased projects, information sharing, and tailored youth activities was vocalized.

Individual agency, cultural exchange, diverse viewpoints, diplomatic efforts, and mutual benefits emerged as pillars for the future amongst the participants. It is also noteworthy that optimism varied between individual connections and shared goals, anchored in interpersonal relations and mutual benefits.

Furthermore, when asked about what stakeholders should do to have more opportunities for young people to cooperate between countries, the participants had some viable suggestions. To encourage youth cooperation, stakeholders should provide support information. Halting hate speech, amplifying communication tools, and fostering understanding were also recommended. In addition, creating more cross-border projects involving youth was highlighted. The dissemination of information and cultural projects were seen as key in broadening horizons which can contribute to better cooperation opportunities. Elevating activities and joint opportunities were also advocated to bolster youth engagement.



## Greece

The participants in the focus groups came from diverse backgrounds ensuring a diverse range of answers and approaches covered in the discussions. It is interesting to note how the participants have had connections with their neighboring countries for various reasons which can be categorized as educational, and leisure purposes. The participants shared their perspectives on the connections they have forged with the countries in question through various means such as professional and personal travels, participation in seminars, conferences, mobility programs, and collaborations with colleagues and organizations. This array of experiences has shaped their viewpoints on the existing cooperation between North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece.

The assessment of the current cooperation among these countries by the participants revealed a nuanced picture. While the rapport with North Macedonia is largely deemed to be positive, a consensus emerged that the potential for collaboration could be further maximized, particularly in the context of Bulgaria and Greece. The participants acknowledged the existence of a sound foundation for cooperation, dating back to economic, tourism, trade, and regional collaborations initiated in the 1980s. However, they highlighted the need for more extensive engagement on youth levels and innovative projects, beyond the scope of existing programs like Erasmus.

The participants also accentuated that from North Macedonia's perspective, a steadfast commitment to cooperation with Greece has consistently been demonstrated through various avenues. This commitment underscores North Macedonia's intention to foster meaningful and productive collaborations and that there ought to be more balance within this process.

While addressing the challenges to cooperation, participants converged on several key issues. Communication barriers, a lack of mutual understanding, the spread of disinformation, and media influence are identified as major hurdles. These factors hinder the establishment of common ground and shared goals in cooperative endeavors.





Moreover, a strong focus was placed on the lack of communication and understanding as the participants explained how there are not enough conversations on issues from all sides of the involved parties. In addition, the issue of media bias was raised, and the fact the participants are generally more exposed to news related to the EU than news about their neighbors.

The discussions further revealed a plethora of obstacles that impede increased cooperation among these nations, particularly those affecting young people. These include problems related to education, political complexities in the Balkans, brain drain, youth unemployment, energy concerns, gender inequalities, lack of opportunity and advancement, ecological challenges, and human rights concerns. Notably, participants also highlighted the need for more open dialogue on issues affecting the involved countries.

When considering actors beyond official political leadership and governments responsible for cooperation, the participants emphasized the pivotal role of civil society and NGOs. They acknowledged that these entities play a crucial role in facilitating cooperation and fostering understanding among the nations. Academic institutions, artists, municipalities, and individual efforts were also cited as contributors to the strengthening of tripartite relations.

In terms of experiences with bilateral or tripartite research projects, participants predominantly expressed positive encounters. These experiences encompassed Erasmus+ programs, collaborative seminars, conferences, and partnerships with various organizations. While some participants indicated positive outcomes, they also highlighted the need for more substantial engagement, addressing complex issues, and sustained impact beyond the duration of projects.

When envisioning the future of cooperation, participants underlined the geographic crossroads of the region and the significance of collaboration given the influence of major powers whose role should be to unite the region. Moreover, they foresaw technology playing a role in future cooperation efforts and emphasized the need to address instabilities and vulnerabilities while taking incremental steps towards enhanced



cooperation. The struggle related to EU enlargement and challenges arising from bureaucracy were also acknowledged. To strengthen cross-border cooperation, participants recommended initiatives by civil society, increased communication channels among municipalities, enhanced opportunities from universities, and the implementation of supportive policies. Participants also emphasized the importance of practical problem-solving, informed decision-making, and facilitating mobility programs and cultural events.

As for the potential of cooperation to address the issues faced by young people, participants expressed varying perspectives. Some believed that cooperation could provide solutions to common problems, such as unemployment and poverty, while others voiced skepticism about its potential impact on such challenges. The role of cooperation in addressing gender pay gaps and promoting inclusivity was also discussed.

Moreover, participants discussed the benefits of cross-border cooperation across fields like municipalities, companies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations. They highlighted how such collaboration can lead to job opportunities, sharing of best practices, cultural exchanges, and access to funding. However, they also acknowledged that visibility and engagement might vary across different sectors, with civil society and NGOs often playing a more prominent role in offering opportunities for young people to come together.





## **Desk Research**

Having the views of the interviewees and participants of the focus groups, motivated us to take a closer look at the projects implemented through Erasmus+[19] and cross-border projects financed through IPA. We analyzed the data from these programs given that they are the ones

---

[19] Official website of Erasmus+ Program <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/>





covering all three countries and allowed cooperation between the countries, as well as the border regions of each country. Furthermore, these funds are the only funds that are publicly available to youth organizations and higher education institutions which enables cooperation. On the other hand, the research team could not locate any special funds for cooperation on a national basis in each of the three countries.

The analyzed Erasmus projects are nationwide, so they give us a clearer picture of the general cooperation and opportunities to get to know each other and create youth/educational/practical networks. North Macedonia has the highest percentage of projects that include either Greece or Bulgaria (or both). 12.5% (23 out of 184) of the Erasmus plus projects where an institution/organization from North Macedonia is the leading partner include one or both other countries. More than half of the implemented projects are in the fields of education and youth component.

In terms of geographical dispensation, 13 of the 23 projects were implemented in Skopje, which shows a rather centralized approach for institutions/organizations in the capital of North Macedonia. It is also interesting to note that there is a higher rate for partnerships between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, with 12 of the 23 projects involving both countries. Only 4 projects are North Macedonia and Greece, and 7 out of the analyzed 23 projects include all three countries. This is also concluded with the figures from the cross-border projects (IPA), where North Macedonia implemented 38 projects until now with Bulgaria, and “only” 9 with Greece, with an institution/organization being from North Macedonia. In terms of topics and fields in which these projects were carried through, tourism is the most practiced field of cooperation, and the majority of projects have been implemented in Strumica.

It is important to note that North Macedonia has the lowest number of Erasmus+ projects from all three countries, which is understandable given the number of funds available for the country compared to Bulgaria and Greece. The total amount of funds used for the 23 Erasmus+ projects is 1.020.961 Euros. When it comes to the IPA Cross-


Border projects, institutions from North Macedonia managed a total of 7.952.426 Euros on projects with Greece and 10.275.523 Euros with Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria on the other hand, we analyzed 792 Erasmus+ projects. Of the 792 projects, 54 or 6.8% included either North Macedonia and/or Greece. Contrary to the case of North Macedonia and their Erasmus+ projects, Bulgaria has a higher rate of projects that include Greece only. 34 of the 54 projects include only Greece, 19 include only North Macedonia and one project includes all three countries. Almost all projects had a youth component and mobility as their primary focus. The vast majority of organizations that lead the implementation of such projects come from Sofija (38 out of 54).

In terms of Bulgarian institutions/organizations being the lead in cross-border cooperation projects financed through IPA, 38 such projects have been identified. Development of tourism is once again the most used field for cooperation and Blagoevgrad has the most projects with municipalities from North Macedonia. For the 54 Erasmus+ projects managed by Bulgarian institutions/youth organizations, a total of 2.016.568 Euros have been implemented by Bulgarian institutions. On the other hand, Bulgarian municipalities and institutions managed 8.483.902 Euros from the IPA Cross Border projects with North Macedonia.

When it comes to Greece, we can note that there were only three projects out of 417 that have North Macedonia or Bulgaria as a partner (0.7% out of all analyzed Erasmus+ projects). When it comes to cross-border cooperation projects funded through IPA, 53 such projects have been implemented with a Greek institution being the leading partner. Most of these institutions come from Thessaloniki and the topic which was mostly addressed are environmental issues and activities.

Since both Greece and Bulgaria are part of the European Union, their cross-border projects have significantly more funding through the Interreg program of the European Union, and their projects vastly outnumber the projects funded through IPA (which are usable and viable for North Macedonia). A total of 78.044 Euros have been



implemented by organizations from Greece when it comes to the Erasmus+ projects which involve Bulgaria and/or North Macedonia. However, when it comes to cross-border projects financed through IPA, a total of 46.839.828 Euros have been implemented by Greek institutions in cooperation with North Macedonia.



This gives us a clearer picture when it comes to cooperation in general, given that most of the networks of partnerships in Erasmus+ come from the capitals of the countries. Although there are cross-border projects, they concentrate on tourism and the environment, rather than more ambitious undertakings for the development of the border regions and possibly addressing burning societal/youth issues in the region.

Having in mind that Greece and Bulgaria have access to other European Union funds, it is difficult to fully calculate the usage and effects of these programs between the two countries. On the other hand, there are no other specific funds or programs that facilitate cross-border cooperation or cooperation as such. This also shows to a certain extent that the countries themselves, besides the contributions to the European Union funds, rarely try to allocate funds and use the potential to address youth issues through cross-border cooperation.

With the presented data which was gathered the conclusions for this report and the current state are multifaced. The first and most apparent conclusion is that the political issues leave a strain on current possibilities for cooperation, almost in all interviewed categories. This is especially visible in the case of interviewees in North Macedonia, citing political tensions, general political climate, and lack of opportunities for building cooperation. One example of how political tensions and misunderstandings can be transformed is the case of the so-called “Prespa agreement” between North Macedonia and Greece. Although some aspects of the agreement have yet to be implemented, the general view after the closure of the tensions resulted in a wider relief of such tensions, especially in the state-municipal sector (which is also backed by the results of absorbing IPA funds for cross-border cooperation between North Macedonia and Greece).

The contrast to political tensions is also shown with the examples of Greece and Bulgaria, which historically might have different interpretations of the relations between the two, yet as both are members of the European Union, they have a platform to focus on cooperation rather than division. This does not mean that political tensions could not come up again, but it does mean that there is a clear way forward for cooperation and joint initiatives for the present and future. Furthermore, these political tensions create biases in citizens, especially through media, which are difficult to address without proper interventions by all societal actors. This could also hamper the future cooperation between the countries.

Secondly, we can note a high willingness and hope for future collaborations and cooperation. Putting aside the points made in our first finding, it is important to emphasize the positive atmosphere for future cooperation. Although the current atmosphere and possibilities might not be ideal for tackling socio-economic issues in the cross-border regions of each of the countries, there is a positive outlook towards the future. More importantly, there is a sense of ownership that all societal



factors play a role in contributing to more and better cooperation. This enables a fertile ground for future activities, programs, and initiatives from all actors.

Thirdly, although there are certain programs for cross-border cooperation and cooperation in general, the allocated funds for such programs are mostly used for activities that do not encourage joint solutions to common societal problems or bigger-scale cooperation between the citizens themselves. It is important to note the interconnectivity among societies, the possibility to meet and jointly find solutions to regional issues is a key aspect in reducing the effects of the findings of this report. Without the possibilities, road networks, and connectivity among citizens, future cooperation would still suffer from the current issues at hand. Changing these issues requires all societal actors to jointly find solutions, with the main task of political institutions to find ways (and add funding) to connect the societies of the three countries, thus enabling stronger networks of cooperation.

Fourthly, when it comes to entrepreneurship and youth employability (or high youth unemployment which all three countries suffer from), there are still gaps in cooperation from businesses that rarely try and use the potential of being in a cross-border region (either through tapping into the workforce of each other or finding common business ventures). When it comes to educational institutions, the level of cooperation is still at a rather rudimentary level. Although most of them see the potential of exchanging know-how and joint growth of knowledge, there are rarely opportunities for joint programs or exchanges, citing language barriers and/or lack of interest. However, the potential for deeper cooperation is there and should be capitalized on by the three countries, especially on building wider educational networks, not only through higher education. Lastly, although municipalities reported a positive current state of cooperation, such a positive state of play should be further built on, especially focusing on youth-related issues that the cross-border municipalities face.

And finally, given the current state of play of cooperation and cross-border cooperation between the three countries, there is a need to properly include youth related issues the countries jointly face. With this report, we showed that although funds are limited, there is a need to mainstream the issues faced by young people in cross-border regions into concrete programs that could benefit cross-border cooperation (by jointly finding solutions to issues).

## Recommendations



1. There is a need for **deepening and effectuating the current positive atmosphere for cooperation and cross-border cooperation** among the three countries. This means that the three countries should further allocate and build platforms for cooperation between the societies, especially young people. Currently, most of the cooperation and cross-border cooperation is solely financed through the European Funds.



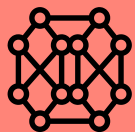
2. **Creating a trilateral or bilateral strategy and program**, with specific aims for **fostering collaboration in the interests of youth**. This strategy and program, with specifically allocated funds should serve as a baseline for fostering cooperation and networks of interested non-state actors between all three countries.



3. Wider **usage of existing programs for youth cooperation**, such as Erasmus+ and **building of civil society networks** with a specific focus on youth related issues. This could include additional co-financing of such projects and support from municipal and state actors, with the main aim of bringing youth together, but also building stronger networks between non-state institutions.



4. **Political actors should restrain themselves from creating polarizing atmospheres** between the societies and **rely on good neighborly relations** as ways for looking forward and building cooperation and cross-border opportunities for youth. With our report, we showed that the political tensions only lower the willingness to cooperate, but also hamper possible future cooperation because of biases created through these situations. Rather than looking back, political actors should look to the current situation and use the potential for the resolution of common problems youth in all three countries face.



5. **Educational institutions, businesses, and civil society organizations** (youth organizations) should **create joint platforms and networks for advocacy for cooperation** between the three countries and use the positive outlook for future cooperation between all interviewed respondents.

**DigiCoop**   
