

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN BULGARIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the opportunities for the development of cross-border cooperation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia from the point of view of the opportunities for better connectivity, development of joint business and formation of common regional economic zones for investments and spatial development of high technologies. In the introductory part, the author presents the state of the border regions of the two countries and the need for their connectivity, as well as the presence of new checkpoints and infrastructure corridors that would support economic interaction. The presentation attempts to outline in practice the process and the need for building an infrastructure network of connections between the settlements on both sides of the border. The demographic potential, the development of the regional economy and the opportunities for innovative enterprises on both sides of the border, as well as the opportunities for tourism, are examined. Corresponding proposals and a framework of opportunities for cooperation and management of the territory on both sides of the countries are made.

Key words: regions, development, cooperation, business, connectivity, settlements and governance

Introduction

The changes in Europe at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century changed the political, social and especially economic situation of the countries of Southeastern Europe and especially on the Balkan Peninsula. The processes of European integration also gave impetus to border development. Gradually, borders lost their effect as a powerful factor for division and isolation. Gradually, after the end of the 1990s, cross-border cooperation began to become a key element of the European Neighborhood Policy, which covers 16 countries located along the external border of the EU. In this way, the border regions of these countries increasingly managed to emerge from isolation. Bulgaria's borders with Yugoslavia, which are extremely rigid, are in a similar situation. In general, we must clearly realize that borders are a serious challenge for regional business, because the total length of the Bulgarian borders is 2,368 km. Of these, 1,225 km is an external border, with 412 km being maritime and 813 km being land. Accordingly, the border between the Republic of Bulgaria and North Macedonia is 165 kilometers long, which is enough to play an important role in promoting economic growth and tourism. With the advancement of European integration over the past four years, the crossings of third-country nationals through border crossing points (BCPs) along the Bulgarian borders have been increasing at a steady pace of about 15% per year. In our time, and especially in Europe, borders connect countries and are an important condition for good neighborliness and mutually beneficial cooperation, because the successful development of any country is impossible in a situation of international isolation. Today, 36 BCPs operate in our geo-economic space in 24/7 operation mode. Of these, 20 BCPs are on the external borders (5 on the Bulgarian-Serbian border; 3 on the Bulgarian-Macedonian border; 3 on the Bulgarian-Turkish border; 4 on the sea border and 5 on the air borders), and 16 BCPs are on internal borders (6 on the Bulgarian-Greek border and 10 on the Bulgarian-Romanian border) (Grozeva, M.2019). Border territories and crossing points for the population, goods and cargo are an important concentration, with key socio-economic importance for regional

development and the development of border relations between individual countries. The object of our research will be the space between North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria and the opportunities for regional development of the regions on both sides of the border (Dimitrov, 2015).. The main characteristics of the idea for the development of the border regions are related to the implementation of a concept that would justify multi-sector partnerships between stakeholders from Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia and the development of joint business ventures and joint investments. This should also be related to the raising of financial resources that would lead to solutions to stimulate the regional economic potential in a wider territorial scope for the regions (Tsonkov, 2021).. Thus, the formation of a comprehensive investment policy will encourage cross-border impact, which will play an important role and support the development of the Pernik, Kyustendil and Blagoevgrad regions on the Bulgarian side and Kriva Palanka, Berovo, Delchevo and Strumica on the North Macedonian side. Providing financial resources for the implementation of joint projects and infrastructure projects will lead to strengthening the regional development of both countries and good cooperation (Milenkoski, M., & Talevski Dimitrija, J. 2001).

The need to form common regional policies

Only after 1989 did cross-border cooperation become possible between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Generalized centralism began to visibly weaken, opportunities for cooperation were created, but over the years this process slowed down and acquired a hesitant character. This was mostly expressed in terms of the hesitation of state relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Instead of cooperation becoming a real priority for the capitals and them seeking opportunities for joint efforts in terms of promoting regional cooperation with legislative measures and programs, as well as allocating funds for the rapid construction of the Trans-European Corridor No. 8 between Albania, North Macedonia and Bulgaria. Gradually, there was a cooling and divergence in economic development between the two countries, which reduced the opportunities for the implementation of effective border policies (Kamberi, 2023). Over the years, it turned out that the two countries approached quite conservatively when making decisions about building joint companies or taking real actions for cross-border cooperation, joint investments and implementing common cross-border national programs to support local business and the agricultural sector. Legislative measures on both sides are timid, and thus satisfactory cooperation has been established between the two countries (Stamenkov, 2017).

Another important problem is the decline in the population in both countries. This is a serious indicator that the younger population is leaving the country. Similar statistics have been constant for 15-25 years for young people going to Western Europe to receive higher education, but recently this has started to happen in both primary and secondary education. New problems are also emerging related to the inclusion of children with special needs in the education system, which has been ongoing for several years, leaving behind special classes (Georgieva, M. 2024). The media in both countries warn that there are not enough teaching assistants to help these students. Inclusion also requires more adequate premises and teaching materials. In secondary education and in public and private high schools, the problems are mainly related to the lack of infrastructure. Education is mainly conducted in two shifts, from 7:30 am to 6:00 pm. Students also face unfavorable conditions in dilapidated student dormitories, while a large number of faculties are waiting for the construction of new facilities, and laboratories are outdated. In this situation, the two countries need to improve socio-economic development in the border regions, and from there to increase the role of business in solving a number of public problems that the countries are having difficulty solving at this stage. On the other hand, there are a number of problems with immigration from Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The amount of funds transferred from abroad leads to the conclusion that these funds play an important role in the national economy of North Macedonia, as well as in a number of regions of Bulgaria.

However, we should not ignore the increasingly frequent warning signs that this source of financing will begin to decline due to changes in the form of migration, in which the migration of entire families currently prevails, as well as due to the change of generations in the migrant population. Also, the structure of their consumption unequivocally shows that these funds cannot be considered as a generator of future profits and development, as well as an assessment of security. (Baranov, N., Smirnov, P. 2020). This would require a significant increase in the investment component. In this regard, within the framework of the European integration of North Macedonia and Bulgaria's membership in the European Union can positively affect the investment climate in the border regions. This means that the government should take serious measures and implement policies to improve the economic environment, macroeconomic and political stability, comparative advantages, and competitiveness rankings in the border regions. In addition, it is necessary to adopt and implement measures aimed at the Macedonian and Bulgarian diasporas and motivate them to invest in their homeland (Kolev, B. 2008).

Thus, the focus on cross-border regions became apparent with Bulgaria's accession to the European Union. Bulgaria was presented with the opportunity for active and targeted cross-border development of the regions, including North Macedonia. In the countries that have joined the European Union, through the adoption of the "acquis communautaire" (the achievements of community law), a mechanism has been created to accelerate cross-border cooperation through the implementation of joint projects under the INTERREG Program. A similar program has been created, the general goal of which is to strengthen territorial cohesion in the cross-border region between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia. The goal is to provide support for increasing the competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and lay the foundations for the creation of cross-border value chains (cooperative cross-border markets), improving mobility and connectivity in the region with the construction of border checkpoints to deal with the increasing traffic of people and goods between the two countries. This also means comprehensive support for joint actions for environmental protection and biodiversity conservation of the cross-border region, which combine protection and conservation or focus on sustainable solutions for biodiversity conservation (Grozeva, M.2019). Prerequisites have also been created for the development of green infrastructure. The prepared joint investment program includes an important priority such as "Integrated Development of the Cross-border Region". Thus, the project ideas after selection receive funding and encourage the implementation of activities and priorities under the adopted The Territorial Strategy of the Cross-border Cooperation Program between Bulgaria and North Macedonia turns out to be a slow mechanism for cooperation due to poor transport connectivity and timid economic interaction. In practice, the potential of the territory between the two borders of the countries is not being developed between the two countries (Dimov, 2001). In this context, Bulgaria must maintain and build significant good-neighborly relations with the Republic of North Macedonia, by fully and accurately implementing the bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation of 2017. In addition, it is good for the Bulgarian state to comply with the "Development Framework of North Macedonia until 2030", adopted by the President of the Republic of North Macedonia, which is in fact a renewed and supplemented program for long-term economic, social, cultural and institutional progress. The points of contact between the Bulgarian state and the North Macedonian governments in the cross-border regions should be based on the following six strategic areas - social balance and demography, green and digital economy, safety and sustainability, competitive economy and entrepreneurship, governance and rule of law, as well as territorial development (Tsonkov, 2021)... In this direction of gradual European integration of North Macedonia, it will encourage the development of the regional economy by further opening the borders (Giannakos, 2001).. This will increase the potential for cross-border cooperation, as well as reduce the importance of the usual differences. Of course, there will be those defined by the national configuration as

deficits, but work must be done to overcome them. Bulgaria still has much to improve and synchronize policies in the field of legislation, economic order, economic power, but also the language, mentality, image and living conditions to improve. It is reasonable for Bulgaria to prioritize increasing wages in rural areas to pay. In the economic area there are many starting points for balanced and complementary cooperation, as already proven by the need for the cross-border cooperation program between Bulgaria and North Macedonia (Stamenkov, 2017).

Cross-border development between Bulgaria and North Macedonia

Within the new conditions of development of the European Union, opportunities have arisen between Bulgaria and North Macedonia to bring cross-border cooperation to a new platform of the European Union. This means looking for tangential opportunities for cooperation at the level of districts or NUTS 3, while at the same time looking for opportunities to facilitate business access on both sides of the border under cross-border cooperation programs. Thus, several NUTS 3 regions are structured between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, through which the relevant levels of cooperation can be implemented. In North Macedonia, the Northeast Region is of great importance in this regard, which is one of the eight statistical regions in North Macedonia. It borders Kosovo and Serbia to the north and Bulgaria to the east, while internally it borders Skopje and the Eastern Statistical Region. The current Gyueshevo border crossing point, which is located in the Deve Bair area (literally translated from Turkish as “camel hill”), also passes through it. The place got its name because of its shape like the hump of a two-humped camel. It is located near the village of Gyueshevo, about 22 kilometers west of the town of Kyustendil and 22 kilometers east of the town of Kriva Palanka. In economic terms, trade is most developed in Kriva Palanka due to its proximity to the Bulgarian border and the town of Kyustendil, while the other settlements are mainly engaged in agriculture (mostly potatoes are grown, to a lesser extent corn, wheat, barley, rye, oats, etc.), after which mining is also important with the nearby mines of Toranitsa (lead and zinc) and Bentomak. In the center of Kriva Palanka there are several traditional craft shops that are still actively working. There are also grocery stores, and on the hills near the town there are many sawmills and workshops for firewood and furniture. On the Bulgarian side, the opportunities for cooperation are mainly the towns of Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Sapareva Banya, as well as the municipality of Samokov. Important for the development of cooperation is the construction of a railway connection between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, as well as the highway from Kumanovo-Deve Bair-Kyustendil-Dupnitsa-Samokov-Ihtiman-Elin Pelin-connection with the Hemus highway as part of the transport corridor No. 8. To achieve these priorities, it is necessary for both countries to work in the same direction and to seek the best solutions for the implementation of these initiatives (Dimov, N., 2001).

Of interest for regional development between the two countries may also be the links between the Eastern Statistical Region. It is one of the eight statistical regions of North Macedonia. The Eastern Region, located in the eastern part of the country, borders Bulgaria. Inland, it borders the Vardar, Skopje, Northeast and Southeast statistical regions. According to the latest population census in 2021, the current population of the Eastern Statistical Region is 150,234 citizens or 8.2% of the total population of the Republic of North Macedonia. The municipalities of Shtip, Berovo, Delchevo, Kocani and Probištip (mining center) are of great importance in this region. The city of Shtip plays a leading role in this region. It is one of the oldest cities in Macedonia. It was first mentioned in the 1st century under the name Astibo, as one of the major cities of eastern Macedonia. In addition to the city of Shtip, the municipality includes 43 villages along the middle reaches of the Bregalnica River on an area of 583.24 km². The population density is 81.95 inhabitants per km². Today, Shtip is the most important economic, transport, educational center of the central-eastern part of the country and is a university center. Another important city in the region is Delchevo. The town is located on the

Bregalnitsa River, in its upper reaches, on the northern slopes of the Maleshevska Mountain and its Golak ridge, near the place where the Bregalnitsa divides the Maleshevska Mountain from the Osogovo Mountain. Delchevo is the largest settlement and center of the Piyanets district located in the slopes of the Maleshevska and Osogovo Mountains. The altitude of the settlement varies between 590 and 640 m above sea level. Another important city in the region is the city of Kochani, with a population of 28,330 inhabitants. It is a municipal center and acts as a support center between Shtip and Dechevo. The cities of Probištip, which has a population of about 10 thousand people, are also important in the region, as a center of the mining industry. In this region, the municipality of Berovo, which is located in the Maleshevo district, is emerging as a tourist center. The area of the municipality is 598.07 km². In addition to Berovo, the municipality also includes eight villages. Within this municipality, there is an available tourist superstructure and opportunities for the development of serious tourist potential. At the current stage, the most active connection of this region with Bulgaria is through the Stanke Lisichkovo border checkpoint. In recent years, a decrease in the flow of people, goods and services in both directions has been noted. On the Bulgarian side of this region is Blagoevgrad region, which has its own difficulties and challenges through which it passes (Grozeva M., 2019).

The next NUTS 3 region is the Southeast statistical region. It is one of the eight statistical regions of North Macedonia. Southeast, located in the southeastern part of the country, borders Greece and Bulgaria. Inland, it borders the Vardar and East statistical regions. Of great importance is the municipality of Strumica, which is located in the eastern part of North Macedonia. Strumica is also the name of the city where the municipal center is located. Strumica Municipality is part of the Southeast Statistical Region. The municipality borders the municipality of Valandovo to the southwest, the municipality of Konche to the northwest, the municipalities of Vasilevo and Bosilovo to the north, the municipality of Novo Selo to the east and Greece to the southeast. This municipality has 49,995 inhabitants and is of important regional economic importance. The opportunities before it are the connection with the Bulgarian municipalities of Sandanski and Petrich, as well as the creation of joint ventures and the creation of a competitive economy in this region between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The connection with Bulgaria is through the Strumica border checkpoint. The other important city in this region is Gevgelija. It is located on the southern border of North Macedonia, on the right bank of the Vardar River, on the main road from Belgrade to Athens in the Bojmia region, part of the Gevgelija-Valandovo Basin. Gevgelija has a population of just over 15,000 people. In recent years, Gevgelija has been developing as a dynamic regional economic center, with the Gevgelija border crossing with Greece, the development of logistics and storage facilities, gambling and entertainment activities, as well as the development of trade, being of great importance. The trend observed in the last decade is for a gradual shift of the population to urban centers, and currently about 59% of the country's population lives in 29 settlements. The largest concentration of the population is in Skopje, where 504,932 inhabitants live. Of the remaining municipalities, the largest concentration of population is in Bitola, Kostivar, Kumanovo and Tetovo, in which municipalities 26.5% of the country's population is concentrated. Together with the population living in Skopje, it can be said that more than half of the country's population /54.7%/ is concentrated in the capital and four municipalities. Of course, this concentration of population creates a number of problems related to the environment.

Improving the regional development of the border regions with new Border Control Points (BCPs) between the two countries

Over the next 10 years, population growth is expected in Eastern North Macedonia, mainly in the municipalities of Strumica, Gevgelija, Shtip, Kumanova, etc. A greater concentration of population is expected in the southern, southeastern and central parts of the country, where on the one hand the regions with intensive agriculture are located, and on the other hand, due to the construction of corridor No. 10 and possibly No. 8, an improvement in regional development and an increase in the demographic potential of this territory is seen. This gives grounds to increase the gravity zone of the regional economy between Bulgaria and North Macedonia in the border regions. This means that new checkpoints and roads between the two countries are needed through which the free movement of goods, people and capital can be carried out (Koulov, B.2016.). In practice, the construction of new border checkpoints between Bulgaria and North Macedonia and the stimulation of small and medium-sized enterprises in the border municipalities are the main priority of the current and future cross-border program in the period 2021-2027 and possibly in a new programming period of 2028-2035. This will most likely be the period in which North Macedonia will use the pre-accession instruments for integration into the European Union and it is a good time to make the relevant new connections between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. In the last two years, it is evident that both countries are directing their efforts primarily towards the implementation and construction of the border crossing point "Klepalo", near Strumyani, as well as the modernization and expansion of the border crossing point "Logodazh" between Stanke Lisichkovo and Delchevo. However, this is not enough for the regional development of the border regions between the two countries. For most analysts and specialists, the construction of several new border checkpoints is of key importance for achieving effective results in terms of improving connectivity between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. First of all, the expectations are that the 15-year-long saga of building the Klepalo border checkpoint between Strumyani and Berovo may be coming to an end. Undoubtedly, work needs to be done on the Strumica - Suvi Laki - Dvorishte (North Macedonia Border Checkpoint) - Klepalo (Bulgaria Border Checkpoint) - Dobri Laki - Razdol - Mikrevo - Strumyani - Bansko direction. In recent years, the Macedonian side has built infrastructure, and about 15 years ago, the road from Berovo to the Bulgarian border began to be built. It is already ready, as is the building of the border checkpoint itself. However, there is no such checkpoint on the Bulgarian side, and the road from Strumyani to the village of Klepalo, over which the border furrow passes, is two-thirds ready. This is contrary to the treaties and agreements on good neighborliness between the two neighboring countries, signed by Prime Ministers Zaev and Borisov, who declared that the priority would be infrastructure. The road to the future checkpoint was mainly rehabilitated by the Strumyani municipality last 2019. It turns right after Strumyani in the direction of the village of Mikrevo. However, there is no sign for Razdol and Klepalo, only for Tsaparevo. This road continues to the village of Razdol. Further on, the road is not in good condition. The future Klepalo border checkpoint is located exactly halfway between Strumyani and Berovo, and with its opening, the distance between the two border municipalities will be shortened by 80 km. After the commissioning of the renovated road section and the construction (of course) of the new border checkpoint, the distance from the center of Strumyani to the center of Berovo will become 45-48 km and the journey will be significantly shortened. The opening of the Klepalo border checkpoint will make travel faster and more convenient for residents of neighboring villages in Macedonia to Southwestern Bulgaria, including tourist sites and resorts such as Bansko, Dobrinishte and Razlog. This project is in an advanced phase, but for a number of reasons it is being delayed and its eventual opening is left for a later stage, probably around 2030.

On the other hand, one could also consider building another border checkpoint between Bulgaria and North Macedonia along the route Skopje - Kumanovo - Probištip - Kočani - Laki - Budinartsi - Berovo - Berovsko Lake - Bachilo Pankovski (North Macedonia border checkpoint) - Gorna Ribnica (Bulgaria border checkpoint) - Goreme - Vrakupovica - Karpelevo

- Kamenitsa - Kresna, which would facilitate the connection with Thessaloniki and Petrich and Sandanski of the North Macedonian cities of Probištip, Kumanovo and Berovo and improve connectivity with Kresna. The construction of this border checkpoint opens up a wonderful prospect for the future development of the Kresna municipality, including new investments, creation of more jobs, etc. (Tzonkov, N., Berberova-Valcheva, T.2022). On the other hand, in the municipality of Berovo and in the vicinity of the border, new villas, guest houses, as well as two five-star hotels have been built, in the accommodation places by the Berovo Lake and near the border, people come from all over the world, not only from Europe. This border checkpoint practically falls into the field of vision

Conclusion

The border areas between North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria, more than others, require a policy of coordination between the countries. The aim of this policy is to open the borders and establish cross-border cooperation and consultations, as well as the joint use of infrastructure facilities. mountain areas. Given the importance of these areas, due to the ecological, economic, social, cultural and agricultural functions they perform, and their value as deposits of natural resources, as well as the numerous constraints to which they are subjected in these areas of activity, planning and management policy must attach particular and appropriate importance to the protection and development of mountain areas. Thus, in the border rural areas, whose main function is agriculture, can play an important role in shaping sustainable regional development. It is essential to create acceptable living conditions in rural areas in terms of all economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects, as well as infrastructure and facilities, distinguishing between underdeveloped and peripheral rural areas and those located near large agglomerations. In addition, urban areas of border regions should contribute to the development of the regional economy and usually have an important role in controlling growth. A balanced urban structure requires the systematic implementation of land use plans and the implementation of guidelines for the development of economic activities in favor of the living conditions of urban residents. In cross-border regions, spatial planning should be pursued jointly by North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria, which should include interdisciplinary approaches, including different levels of analysis and design, constituting the conceptual basis of regional development policies and intervening to correct anomalies and decline that may arise in their implementation. Therefore, strategies, programs and plans for integrated spatial planning between North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria in border settlements, which should be in line with the general guidelines for European planned space, with priority reference to maintaining a rational balance between private and public interest, while strictly respecting the legal regime of land ownership.

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