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Inter-Border Cooperation In The Area Of Serres Prefecture And Consequences Of The EU Bulgaria Accession – An Empirical Research

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Abstract

The enlargement of the European Union to twenty five (25) member states (2004) resulted in greater inequalities between European regions and subsequent expansions in other countries of south-east Europe may exacerbate these inequalities. These regional disparities in the enlarged EU must be reduced and dealt with an effective cohesion policy, part of which is the development of cross-border cooperation. According to the European Outline Convention of Madrid (1980), trans-frontier cooperation means any agreed transaction intended to encourage and cultivate the relationships between neighbouring local authorities of two or more parties. Euroregions promote cross-border cooperation between border regions and social partners in areas such as culture, education, tourism and the economy. From a purely economic standpoint, the preservation of natural or “invisible” borders is an obstacle to economic development. Since “invisible barriers” (languages, cultural problems, etc.) are hard to eliminate, the need to turn the boundaries in contact zones is stressed. These areas should be “bridges between states”, “channels for the mutual understanding of peoples”, “prosperity borders” and “cradles of development”. Factors that promote cross-border cooperation is, among others, the tradition and experience in collaboration, adequate common mechanisms by local authorities, the availability of sufficient financial resources, etc. On the contrary, factors that impede this cooperation are legal restrictions, disputes about the responsibility of the various levels of government, the limited experience of local authorities in the implementation of development programs, etc. It is estimated that, regarding the economic situation of regions bordering to candidate countries and the potential consequences of EU enlargement on them, the border areas of Greece and especially continental border areas, are among the least favoured regions, since they are faced with the most difficult situation regarding income, labour market dynamics, infrastructure and human resources. The prefecture of Serres, a border region, according to the predictions of General and Regional Framework for Physical Planning, is indented to become a regional growth pole of the trans-border cooperation.

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In this paper, based on the results of empirical research in institutions of Serres, we examine the collaboration of institutions of Serres with their respective Bulgarian ones. More particularly we explore areas of cooperation, opportunities and obstacles, results, and impacts on Serres by the accession of Bulgaria to the EU. The majority of institutions consider Bulgaria's endorsement to the EU as a positive progress for Serres and the extended region. Half or more of the institutions began their collaboration after the Bulgarian accession, aiming mainly to economic-development benefits and the exchange of experience and expertise, in fields of environment, culture, education, employment, entrepreneurship, etc.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, based on the results of an empirical research in institutions of the Prefecture of Serres, we examine the collaboration of institutions of Serres with their respective Bulgarian ones. More specifically we investigate: the existing level of cooperation with counterparts in Bulgaria, grounds and areas of cooperation, the means of financing initiatives, opportunities and obstacles faced, the degree of satisfaction and effectiveness of cooperation initiatives, and the consequences, opportunities and obstacles created on Serres after the accession of Bulgaria to the EU.

2. Theoretical framework, an overview

As for the importance and role of border areas, relevant literature suggests that under normal conditions, these areas should be "bridges between states", "corridors understanding of peoples", "border prosperity" and "cradles of development" (Krenek Tomas, 2005, p 14). During the first half of the 20th century, scientific research on inter-border partnerships focused on the design and changes in national borders, and to resolve cross-border disputes (Hartshorne, 1936, pp. 180). In the next decades, due to political changes in Eastern and Western Europe, there is a differentiation at the level of scientific research. In Western Europe, research has focused on changes on quality and functioning of borders, their impact on economic development and socio-spatial structures and the potential of development in the areas around the borders (Bürkner, 1996, p 1-11).

In the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities, Madrid (1980), transfrontier cooperation is defined as any agreed transaction intended to encourage and foster neighborly relations between territorial communities or authorities, and any agreement necessary for this purpose.

At the level of state initiatives, after 1989, organizing regional cooperation systems became a mainstream, because of the agreed orientation in most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) towards the process of European integration. In this context, a number of regional cooperation initiatives were formed in South East Europe (SEE), such as the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI), the Royaumont Initiative, the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEEC) and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSCE). Regarding the importance and contribution of regional cooperation initiatives, it is indicated that these initiatives have been utilized as vehicles for faster integration of the countries into Euro-Atlantic mechanisms, have contributed to maintaining peace in relevant areas and had a beneficial effect on national economies and regional integration of these countries. Shortages are focused mainly on their inability to produce binding decisions, a limitation to issues of "ancillary policy" and the perception that regional cooperation can not substitute participation in European integration at any level (Botsiou K., 1999, pp. 3, 37 - 45).

In a related article which examines European policies for territorial cooperation and their effects on growth and spatial policies, it is noted that territorial cooperation acquires different features on the external borders of the EU in contrast to the internal borders. While inland-EU cooperation focuses on issues of cohesion and elimination of dividing lines, in the case of external borders there is a challenge of finding the right balance between cooperation and border control. Territorial cooperation between countries, regions and municipalities, is closely linked to the objectives of spatial development. However the level of spatial development in border areas, is usually below the corresponding one in metropolitan regions and the hinterland because of their peripheral character. In this context,

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