

## NEITHER HOSTILE NOR FRIENDLY: ROMANIAN-BULGARIAN VICINITY AND ITS MEDIA REPRESENTATION

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### Abstract

Since 2007 the border between Romania and Bulgaria has become an internal border of the European Union. Although there is a strong political commitment toward cooperation on both border sides, the cross-border cooperation framework, initiated in 1999 under the pre-accession funds, has had weak results, that is few durable cross-border networks, except for the top-down driven partnerships. The prevalence of formal institutions and the shortage of informal networks suggest that the border communities need formal regulations to cooperate. From the multiple causes of this need, this research assumes that the lack of trust hampers, at a significant extent, the cross-border networking in the Romanian-Bulgarian case. Thus, this research explores, by means of discourse analysis tools, reciprocal representations of the neighboring communities in order to highlight underlying clichés leading to indifference and distrust. These representations fall under four themes: imagined opportunities related to the other border side, imagined threats coming from the other border side, perceptions of cooperation, and stereotypes. Considering that each scientific explanation contains to some extent practical implications, this research points out that a crucial field that should be targeted by the regional policies in Romania and Bulgaria is the creation of a culture of trust, by means of changed discourses and informal networks.

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, Romania, Cross-Border Cooperation, Discourse analysis

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Six years after the accession of Romania and Bulgaria into the EU (2007) and 14 years since the beginning of PHARE Cross-Border Cooperation program between the two countries (1999), I had the occasion to travel by car, in 2012, between the two countries on the Giurgiu-Russe bridge, the only terrestrial connection at that time along the 470 km long fluvial border, as well as the most transited border crossing point. Arrived in Giurgiu, the Romanian border city, just one small traffic sign in Romanian only, “vama” (customhouse), guides the traveler toward the frontier. A tortuous, badly paved road, lacking any written sign meanders through poor country houses and reaches the passport check points. The formalities go smooth. The effective bridge crossing however is less smooth due to the asphalt’s patched structure left after covering the bridge’s holes. At the end of the bridge, in Bulgaria, the same landscape welcomes the traveler. It seems familiar, though strange, because the Romanian border landscape has been translated into the Cyrillic alphabet. Language and culture are by no means

trivial issues of this border, since most Romanians cannot read the Cyrillic alphabet. Besides, body movements render more difficult the communication, since Bulgarians shake their heads to show approval and nod their heads to show disapproval, whereas Romanians do the opposite. Among piles of garbage, a few stray dogs and an old beggar, the cars head toward the most conspicuous sign of modernity: a gas station. Helped by the gas station's staff in a bit of Romanian and a bit of English, but not by signposts, the traveler is sometimes able to grasp how to pay for the road taxes in the neighboring country and how to reach eventually her destination.

Countless bilateral protocols, bilateral meetings and trainings, as well as generous budgets paved the way toward the reconstruction of this bridge and the reduction of border formalities. Yet, the outcome is limited and poor. Although the goals have been reached -- the bridge and passport check points are functional; these achievements did not have any spillover in the immediate proximity. The lacks of visible multilingual signs, the underdeveloped surrounding region, the difficulty to communicate and find information, and not the least the mediocre state of renovation of the bridge are puzzling and unexplained queries, which have the unexpected effect of providing an intriguing line of inquiry into the discursive representation of this border.

This inquiry opens with a brief depiction of two peculiarities of the Romanian-Bulgarian borderscape: the inefficient connecting infrastructure despite numerous CBC program's funds and the lack of interaction between (potentially) twin cities. In the next two sections this research unfolds its theoretical underpinnings by discussing the formal and informal dimensions of cross-border interactions, as well as the concept of trust and its relevance for the cross-border cooperation. Then, it delves into the empirical text analysis in order to highlight Romanian images of Bulgaria and vice versa, that is imagined opportunities and threats related to the border, perceptions of cooperation, as well as stereotypes and rankings.

## 2. THE BORDERSCAPE

Along the 470 km long fluvial border there are nowadays two bridges. The first bridge, between Giurgiu and Russe, has been built in 1954; the second one, between Calafat and Vidin, has opened in 2013. Started in 2000, its construction has been constantly delayed due to innumerable reasons such as changes in the Romanian and Bulgarian legislations; disputes with the building company; disagreements between both sides regarding the position of the bridge as well as its opportunity; expropriations troubles on both border sides. Beside these two bridges, there are seven other crossing points on Danube, with ferry facilities. The 139.1 km terrestrial border is better connected, with five

crossing points -- two of them recently opened in 2012. There are also 22.2 km of maritime border. Apparently (in figures and documents) the border seems decently connected, but in reality the ferry connections do not work as expected. An example of inefficiency is the Bechet – Oryahovo crossing point (improved under CBC Program 2009) that lacks a fix ferry schedule, because it depends on the load of cars. As a result, vehicles prefer to make a large detour on the Giurgiu-Russe bridge. Other example is the Silistra-Călărași ferry connection, redeveloped under the CBC Program 2001, which enables travelers to cross directly the border with a modern, new ferry. However, due to the chaotic ferry schedule and the high ferry taxes, people make a detour by taking a smaller, private Romanian ferry between Călărași and Ostrov (both in Romania), and then crossing the border at a terrestrial crossing point between Ostrov (Romania) and Silistra (Bulgaria).

Another puzzling discrepancy between reality and its representation on the map is the high number of (potential) twin towns across the border, such as Vidin-Calafat, Lom-Rast, Oryahovo-Bechet, Nikopol-Turnu Magurele, Svishtov-Zimnicea, Russe-Giurgiu, Tutrakan-Oltenița, Silistra- Călărași. Although they look on the map like twin cities, they are actually just transit points toward their respective inlands. The border proximity does not influence the social and economic networks of these border towns, which remain peripheral and oriented toward their provincial capitals, as if the border has not been changed since 1989. Evidently, economic and demographic factors such as high unemployment and ageing population, among the major ones, contribute to the marginality of border towns. However, as this research argues, beside these factors, the peripherality of border towns is augmented also by the lack of communication with the people across the border.

The contemporary history of this border has definitely contributed to this tendency to avoid contacts. Before 1989, people mobility across the borders within the communist Eastern European block was very controlled and limited. Although not as unattainable as the mobility toward Western countries, the traffic between Bulgaria and Romania was still difficult. Therefore, no tradition of networking can be used nowadays in cross-border initiatives. Moreover, no close informal or family connections have developed across the border – as it is the case of the Hungarian- Romanian, Serbian-Romanian and Moldovan-Romanian frontiers – because historically the most part of the Bulgarian minority in Romania settled far from the border, in the Western part of Romania. The Romanian minority in Bulgaria has settled in Vidin province, at the border. However, it did not add much to the networking process across the border.

In the 1980s, when the communist regime hardened drastically in Romania, Bulgarian TV programs (cartoons and sport, especially) as well as some food and clothing items (brought by the few Romanian tourists in Bulgaria) crossed the border from Bulgaria to Romania. Yet, this trend, emerged out of a

severe economic and cultural penury, did not yield any spillover in terms of curiosity toward the other side's language<sup>1</sup> or culture (e.g., no pop songs or movies).

In the 1990s, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the border has become the place of "trader-tourists", who engaged "in activities associated with the capitalistic spirit of the new era" (Thuen 1999: 738), as it was the case with the other borders in the former communist block. After 2000, these informal economic activities waned, because merchandise became available on both border sides and prices were not so different. Concluding, a tradition of social interaction on which cooperation can be built lacks in this border region.

### 3. FORMAL AND INFORMAL DIMENSIONS OF CROSS-BORDER INTERACTIONS

The cross-border cooperation between Bulgaria and Romania has developed predominantly under the central and regional authorities' institutional framework and has targeted vast objectives related mostly to the transportation and communication infrastructure. Less institutionalized initiatives or initiatives oriented toward small-scale objectives, pertaining to the "soft" sphere of social life, are scarce. Yet, the "soft" projects have been increasingly acknowledged by scholars and practitioners as necessary for building a durable foundation of cross-border relations. The mix of formal institutions and informal networks is crucial for cross-border cooperation (Scott and Collins 1997). Learning each other's language, common school activities from kindergarten to university or associations able to identify and promote common values represent programs with a hard-to-measure immediate impact. However, in the long run, they have more chances to boost genuine cross-border relations than over-institutionalized programs. The "people approach" versus "cross-border cooperation approach" to borders moves the focus on the emotional aspects of interactions that interfere in the accurate estimation of distance between cities (Van Houtum 2000). Distance across borders is not measured anymore by means of Euclidean geometry since "the distance to cities across a border is greater than the distance to other cities within the homeland. An overestimation of the distance is interpreted as a low degree of personal experience and knowledge regarding those cities. [...] An underestimation, by contrast, means that the city is closer according to the subject's perception. It is generally found that the presence of a border increases the effect of the over- or underestimation" (Van Houtum 2000: 70-1).

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s the Russian language ceased to be a compulsory subject in the Romanian schools. Thus, a great part of the Romanian generation of 1980s cannot read the Cyrillic alphabet.

Moreover, in the border proximity, geographical distance can shrink and extend according to multiple networks of solidarity (such as ethnic-, cultural, or economic-based), as Strihan (2008) showed for the Flemish-Walloon regional border in Belgium.

In this vein, the European Union has launched the Joint Small Projects Fund (JSPF), which aims at supporting small-scale, “people to people”, soft projects involving local and regional actors from the border regions (EC/ EuropeAid 1998: 4).

JSPF is designed to strengthen mutual awareness of the socio-cultural and the economic conditions in the border regions and to produce significant spillovers -- that is, to generate integration effects in other fields.

By itself, JSPF alone can only partially lead to the social capital formation, as Mirwaldt (2012) showed for the German-Polish border.

On the other hand, the literature acknowledges the fact that institutional design is needed to build social capital in places that lack it (Teles 2012). JSPF encourages people to interact as non-institutional actors and, thus, generates trust, an essential ingredient of cross-border cooperation. “[T]he lack of mutual trust makes the creation of lasting cross-border bodies difficult and the same applies to efforts at cooperation in general” (EC 2000: 3).

A look at the Joint Small Projects Fund, for the analyzed border, in its first implementation stage (2000-2006) shows a very high funds’ absorption rate and a rich array of soft projects’ themes (Table 1). A closer look at project’s beneficiaries, however, unveils a trend that characterized the first post-communist decade in Romania and Bulgaria, namely the mushrooming of private foundations, associations and NGO’s established with the unique goal of accessing international funds.

As Table 1 shows for the Romanian beneficiaries, several are at present sued for fraud. In the first years of implementation, until 2004, many beneficiaries have been private associations and foundations. Beginning with 2004, their number decreased significantly whereas the number of local public actors (schools, public libraries, city halls, state museums, chambers of commerce) increased. The allocated funds also decreased in 2004, as Figure 1 shows. By the end of the first implementation stage of JSPF, in 2006, the ratio between private foundations and public actors began to be more balanced.

Future research at the end of the second implementation stage (2007-2013) can track further trends of this balance, which is important for evaluating the real dynamics of the local and informal cross-border networking.

Table 1. Summary of PHARE CBC Program Romania-Bulgaria, 1999-2006. (data source: The Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism, URL <http://www.mdr.ro/dezvoltare-regionala/programul-cbc/-4580>).

TABLE 1 - SUMMARY OF PHARE CBC PROGRAM ROMANIA-BULGARIA, 1999-2006. (SOURCE: DATA PROCESSED FROM THE ROMANIAN MINISTRY OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM)

year	Projects' focus on:		Absorption rate (%)		Beneficiaries		Notes on JSPF projects
	hard objectives	soft objectives	Total	JSPF	of CBC projects except for JSPF	of JSPF	
1999	infrastructure (energetic, transport), air pollution.	No	na		National Ministries		
2000	infrastructure (telecommunication, water, electricity and gas distribution); Danube ecology; border check points	Joint Small Projects Fund (JSPF) starts	na		National Ministries		
2001	Black Sea and Danube ecology; border check points.	JSPF: school programs, business networks, health and ecology, tourism (see note)	100	97,45	National Ministries	Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Foundations, Schools	Project RO 0103.04.03 "Tourism Danubian Stock Market" contracted by Fortuna Danubius Foundation (the foundation's president has been judged in 2012 for corruption in receiving the EU funds allocated for the CBC projects, together with the director of the Cross-border Cooperation Regional Office Giurgiu; source: <a href="http://www.pna.ro/faces/comunicat.xhtml?id=3121">http://www.pna.ro/faces/comunicat.xhtml?id=3121</a> Romanian National Anticorruption Directorate).
2002	Transport infrastructure, pollution	JSPF: cultural exchanges, cultural events, rural development, tourism	100	99,85	National Ministries, National Authorities for Roads, City Councils	Foundations, High-schools, Universities, City Councils	
2003	Nature protection, transport infrastructure	JSPF: culture, business environment (see note 2.), health care, rural development, tourism (see note 1.)	100	96,27	National Ministries, National Authorities for Forests	Foundations, High-schools, Universities, City Councils, Chambers of Commerce and Industry	1. Project RO 2003/005-701.06.01.10 "Romanian-Bulgarian International Center of Tourism" contracted by Fortuna Danubius Foundation (see year 2001 for details) 2. Project RO 2003/005-701.06.01.13 "Cross-Border Business Development Agency" contracted by Association Dunarg Ottenja (the president has been sued for falsifying documents in order to get EU funds, source: <a href="http://www.vechioravuri.ro/sinteza-dosarelor-dna-din-luna-martie-ajunse-in-instanta/">http://www.vechioravuri.ro/sinteza-dosarelor-dna-din-luna-martie-ajunse-in-instanta/</a> )
2004	Transport infrastructure, groundwater management	JSPF: business environment, rural planning, cooperation planning	99,65	95,94	National Ministries, City Councils and Chambers of Commerce	Majority of City Councils, Chambers of Commerce, 1 primary school, 1 public library, 1 foundation	
2005	Environment, business, transport (see note)	JSPF: cultural events, cultural heritage, ecology, health, training for accessing EU funds	98,84	100	City Councils and Chambers of Commerce, 1 foundation	Majority of City Councils, Schools, 3 foundations, 1 state museum.	Project RO 2005/017-535.01.01.22 "Promoting multi-modal transport services in Romania and Bulgaria" contracted by Foundation Safe Haven (two of the foundation's founders sued in 2012; source: <a href="http://www.pna.ro/faces/comunicat.xhtml?id=3112">http://www.pna.ro/faces/comunicat.xhtml?id=3112</a> , Romanian National Anticorruption Directorate)
2006	Transport and business infrastructure, ecology	JSPF: tourism, business, cultural events	99,63	100	Local and regional authorities (Chambers of Commerce, 2 foundations.	Local and regional authorities, Schools, Universities, Museums, Foundations	

Source: website <http://www.mdr.ro/dezvoltare-regionala/programul-cbc/-4580>).

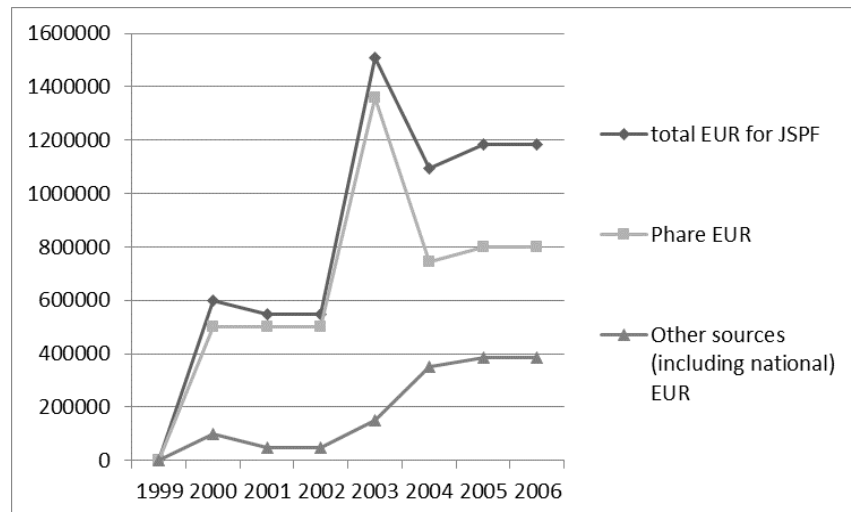


FIGURE 1 - THE BUDGET OF JOINT SMALL PROJECTS FUND BETWEEN 1999-2006.

#### 4. TRUST AND CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

Drawing on the interdisciplinary line of inquiry into border studies (Lamont and Monlnár 2002, Berg and van Houtum 2003) opened up by the social constructivist perspective, which considers borders as partially formed and maintained by contested social practices and discourses (Paasi 2001, Meinhof 2002, Pavlakovich et al 2004, Van Houtum et al. 2005, Newman and Paasi 1998), I highlight, for the purpose of this study, the variable of trust. Trust interferes highly in the durable, genuine and effective networking: “Cross-border cooperation strongly depends on the commitment and mutual trust of the actors directly involved and in a wider sense also of the people concerned” (EC/ EuropeAid 1998: 9).

Trust, understood as a “lubricant of cooperation” (Dasgupta 1988), has several key functions, needed in the type of strong networks that constitute the model of cross-border cooperation in Europe, namely the successful Euroregions (Kepka and Murphy 2002). The relevant functions for cross-border cooperation, based on the sociologist Piotr Sztompka’s theory on trust (2000), are: to encourage the participation in various forms of associations; to support tolerance toward strangers, as well as recognition of cultural and political differences; to lower the transaction costs of cooperation. On the contrary, distrust wears down networks, cuts communication, encourages adverse stereotypes (Sztompka 2000) and adds to “pluralistic ignorance” (Allport 1954). From this perspective, the paradox of the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border cooperation – that is, available resources and political will for cooperation but few materialized cooperation networks – becomes clearer. The deficient trust, characterizing this border at the informal level, generates ignorance and indifference. “People who do not trust one another will end up cooperating only under a system of formal rules and regulations, which have to be negotiated, agreed to, litigated, and enforced [...] Widespread distrust in a society [...] imposes a kind of tax”

(Fukuyama 1995: 27-28). The cross-border partnerships between Romania and Bulgaria have easily included big institutional actors, since the CBC programs are implemented through national and regional authorities. More difficult, though, it is to attract other relevant and genuine actors from the local community, actors who do not play an institutional role in the local/ regional/ national authorities, but who have a say on the local level.

The deficient trust at informal level emerges out of the lack of face-to-face contacts across the border, over a long period of time. Under the former communist East European regimes, borders have been constructed by all means, soft and hard, as solid barriers. This has heavily impeded the building of trust between the neighboring communities. Thus, there is no history of previous everyday socializing across the border and no tradition of local cooperation other than the central authorities' cooperation programs.

## 5. IMAGINING THE OTHER

If trust and everyday practice of socializing across the border are to be enhanced, a departure point is to explore reciprocal representations of otherness -- Romanian images of Bulgaria and vice versa -- in order to attempt altering them. The collective image of the other border side interferes in common, face-to-face interactions across the border, since people network according to the stereotypes, nationalistic sentiments and generalized images shared by their own culture. "[F]or the most part it is from stereotypes that we get our ideas about social groups" (Dyer 2002: 14). Stereotypes draw clear borders between insiders and outsiders (Hall 1997). Popular representations, hidden in people's daily practices, reinforce the barrier effect of borders as Strúver (2004) highlighted for the Dutch-German border, Paasi and Prokkola (2008) for the Finnish-Swedish border, and Strihan (2006) for the US-Mexico border.

I draw here on a line of thought opened by recent explorations of cultural identity in border communities (Meinhof 2003, Strúver 2005), which employs tools and techniques of discourse analysis. "[S]tereotypes or ethnic prejudices, just like socially shared knowledge, are essentially reproduced in society through discourse" (Van Dijk 1990: 165). Therefore, the exploration of language, as a social phenomenon, in the borderland contexts, allows for the identification of collective representations of otherness and, thus, it improves the assessment of the barrier effect of borders.

The analysis of the Bulgarian-Romanian border environment follows the inquiry lines opened up by Van Dijk (1997, 2009), and Wodak and Meyer (2009). I explore representations of the other border side, as they appear in two national newspapers, throughout 2008, one year after both countries' accession to the European Union. This year is emblematic since it has been the starting point of cross-border



initiatives between the two countries as EU members and it constitutes thus a reference point for further inquiries into future transformations of this border's discourse.

In 2008 it was hard to find newspapers with any news about the other border side. This is a clear suggestion about the regional indifference between the two border sides. Moreover, the local magazines and newspapers, published in the cities close to the border, ignored entirely the other side. As a result, the choice had to be made from the newspapers with national coverage that included some news about the other country. Without taking into account the tabloids, two national newspapers, which ranked among the top ten, Gândul (The Thought) in Romania and Novinar (The Reporter) in Bulgaria, had an amount of news that is significant for the analysis. Except for the sport news, all news mentioning the other country has been analyzed.

In general, Bulgaria is not a discussed topic in the Romanian news. Bulgaria is mostly mentioned in the EU related news and in rankings about social and economic issues. Across the border, news about Romania is more frequent and varied: from domestic politics to social issues, and even trivia such as car accidents, football players, and cooking records. This suggests at least some interest about what happens across the border. Besides, the rankings in which Romania's place (together with other neighbors) is clearly mentioned abound, indicating a competitive stance.

The thematic filters of the analysis include four major themes: (1) Imagined opportunities related to the border; (2) Imagined threats related to the border; (3) Perceptions of cooperation; (4) Stereotypes and rankings.

## 6. ROMANIAN IMAGES OF BULGARIA

### *(1) Imagined opportunities related to the border*

The economic opportunities convey in general negative connotations (e.g., "Bulgarian «Investment» in Romania: 150.000 Counterfeit Euro" is the title of an article published by Gândul, 17.04.2008). Moreover, the border appears as an opportunity to escape the severe Romanian rules regarding car taxes, arms trafficking, and pollution standards. For instance, Romanians used to register their second-hand cars just across the border, in the Bulgarian city Russe, in order to avoid the high pollution tax for such cars in Romania. Even when the border proximity is presented as an opportunity to buy cheaper ware or real estate in Bulgaria, the underlying tone of the articles is ironic: "The Bulgarian, at least the inhabitant of Russe [a Bulgarian border town] has become the best friend of the Romanian. After the border, the Romanian contributors to the economy of Russe are treated with full respect" ("The Guide of

the Romanian Shopper in Russe”, Gândul, 6.10.2008). In the same vein, the article “The Commuters of the Supermarkets across Danube” (Gândul, 27.08.2008) analyzes mockingly the behavior of Romanian shoppers: “Romanian shoppers are easily recognizable: unlike Bulgarians, they have full shopping carts and cram the goods in the trunk until overfilling”. The ironical tone underlying both articles unveils the Romanians’ self image of economic superiority, though, according to both texts, Romanians perceive the Bulgarian prices as lower and the quality of goods as higher than those in Romania.

The Romanians’ self image of economic superiority underlies also the topic of industry relocations across the border, such as those of the Romanian stocking manufacture Adesgo and of the international companies Kraft Foods and Nestlé. These relocations are not perceived as the result of Romanian inability to adapt economically, but only as the typical outcome of several factors that usually characterize developed economies: higher salaries, not easily available workforce, enforced EU pollution regulations, and expensive real estate. The articles infer that if the process of relocation is initiated by these factors in very developed economies, then the Romanian economy is also very developed.

The best perceived opportunity is the Black Sea coast tourism in Bulgaria. Prices are considered cheaper and the quality of services higher than those in Romania. Moreover, buying Bulgarian properties on the Black Sea coast seems to be a good opportunity for Romanians, as titles such as “Bulgaria Tempts Romanians with Low Prices” (Gândul, 1.04.2008) announce. Yet, except for the sea coast, Bulgaria appears only as a difficult transition area toward other popular holiday destinations for Romanians such as Turkey and Greece, due to allegations of corruption within police and high rate of car theft. Titles such as “Bulgaria, a Double-dealer Country for Drivers” (Gândul, 04.07.2008) warns about the precautions that Romanian drivers should take on holiday in Bulgaria.

Learning each other’s language is mentioned just once in the context of employment opportunity. However, the Romanian article draws only on Bulgarian media sources to present this topic. “The Bulgarian students prefer to learn Romanian instead of English” is the title of an article that cites the Bulgarian newspaper Standard: “Considering the high interest, it is foreseen that Romanian language will be part of the curriculum of many high schools in Bulgaria. The situation is, however, reciprocal, asserts the Bulgarian newspaper, Romanians being in turn eager to study in Bulgaria” (Gândul, 30.05.2008).

***(2) Imagined threats related to the border***

The major threats related to the border appear to be smuggling and, to a lesser extent, nuclear pollution. Border smuggling refers to cigarettes and arms. Whereas the illegal trafficking of cigarettes is viewed as a general problem of all Romanian borders, the arms trafficking concerns only the Bulgarian border. Although perceived as an increasing phenomenon, the illegal arms trafficking with Bulgaria is not described anxiously (e.g., Gândul, 30.08.2008).

Nuclear pollution is not emphasized as a pressing issue as long as it does not actually touch the national territory. This means that the construction of the Bulgarian nuclear plant at Belene, close to the border, rises only indirect worries via the Bulgarian ecologists who warn “that the plant will be built in a highly seismic area, a fact that will endanger in case of an earthquake not only Bulgaria, but also its neighbors” (Gândul, 04.09.2008). Worries about the existent nuclear plant at Kozlodouy (a Bulgarian border town) come also indirectly, through the European Union’s safety concerns. More threatening looks the future economic competition between the Bulgarian nuclear plant at Belene and the Romanian nuclear plant at Cernavodă, as the title suggests: “Belene Project Is in Big Competition with the Romanian Project at Cernavodă” (Gândul, 19.01.2008).

Yet, worries appear when the national territory is touched by something tangible. The transit of nuclear fuel from Bulgaria (Kozlodouy) to Ukraine on Danube, through Romania, is described as a national security threat rather than as an ecological danger. The words used in the article “Bulgarian nuclear convoy «escorted» by Romanian policemen in old recreation boats” (Gândul, 6.08.2008) convey military connotations: “convoy”, “escort”, “attacks”, “catastrophic effects”, “state security”. However, the article blames only the Romanian authorities for their carelessness: “In the darkest scenarios, Romanian port authorities have foreseen attacks against the convoy, followed by the theft of nuclear fuel, or sailing accidents, which can have catastrophic effects for Danube and the surrounding area. Big questions are also raised by the immense quantity of transported nuclear fuel, but the institutions that assure the state security have no reaction” (Gândul, 6.08.2008).

***(3) Perceptions of Cooperation***

The news about cross-border projects is rare and relies only on Bulgarian sources. For instance, the news about the Phare funds allocated for the development of the border region cites a representative of the Phare Agency in Bulgaria; the news about the Brussel-based initiative that allows the free movement of people in the border region between Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria cites a Bulgarian source, too; the news about the project that unifies the gas networks of Bulgaria and Romania cites the

Bulgarian media agency Focus News. Only the news about the bridge across Danube cites both Romanian and Bulgarian sources. The lack of Romanian direct sources about cross-border projects may suggest indifference toward this topic. Moreover, the articles on common projects convey a doubtful tone that renders the cross-border initiatives as improbable achievements. This unconvincing nuance is noticeable through the frequency of modal verbs that induce the idea of improbability (“could allocate”, “would allocate”) and the adjectives/ adverbs denoting the same idea (“probable”, “possible”). “Romania and Bulgaria could allocate together 50 million Euros for the modernization of the bridge across Danube, Giurgiu-Russe. [...] He [the Bulgarian Minister of Transportation] specified that is highly probable that the Bulgarian side would allocate 25 million Euros for this project, waiting for a similar contribution from the Romanian side” (Gândul, 5.11.2008, emphasis added). Other article, about a gas networks project, has a similar tone: “Possible agreement regarding the unification of Romanian and Bulgarian gas networks” (Gândul, 14.05.2008, emphasis added).

Paradoxically, the main cross-border project -- the construction of a second bridge across Danube -- appears only in two short articles (Gândul, 9.09.2008 and 12.10.2008), which bring to attention the funds allocated by Romania for this project and the possible date of starting the construction. Beside the rarity of information, the data regarding the allocated funds differ erroneously: the September article mentions 100 million Euros, whereas the October article mentions only 51 million Euros. Considering the good quality of the analyzed newspaper, this mistake can only suggest, once more, the indifference toward this subject or the scarcity of data available from public sources. A doubtful tone pervades the news. The beginning of the bridge construction seems improbable (“may start”), although the two ministers of transportation decided “the acceleration” of this project (which implies that the project has been in a lagging state): “Works for the bridge across Danube [...] may start in the beginning of the next year [2009], after Ludovic Orban [the Romanian Minister of Transports] and his Bulgarian counterpart have decided the acceleration of this project” (Gândul, 12.10.2008, emphasis added).

#### **(4) Stereotypes**

Bulgarians as peasants. An old Romanian cliché considers Bulgarians as good farmers. Even successful commercial brands have emerged out of this myth, such as the ones conceived by a Romanian firm of processed fruits and vegetables: “Out of the Bulgarian’s Garden” (“Din grădina bulgarului”) and “Totev’s Pantry” (Cămara lui Totev), where Totev can be easily recognized as a Bulgarian name by Romanians. However, the cliché conveys also a negative connotation for Romanians: the Bulgarians’ rural condition and backwardness.

In the analyzed articles, the image of Bulgarians as peasants appears often, with both positive connotations: "The next stop can be the marketplace, where vegetables and fruits have very low prices [...] but the quality is that for which Bulgarians are famous" (Gândul, 6.10.2008) and ironical connotations: "The Cucumber [metaphor for Bulgaria] – The Knife to Throat of the Romanian Seaside" (Gândul, 06.05.2008). The last title refers to the Black Sea coast tourism that flourishes on the Bulgarian side and vanishes on the Romanian side. Although only the Romanian side is blamed for the failure of its tourism, an underlying superiority arises out of the word "cucumber" that stands for Bulgaria. This metaphor points out the idea that if the Bulgarians, who are seen as just peasants, succeeded in the tourism industry, there is no excuse left for Romanians to self-justify their failure. "Although the Black Sea is as cold in May [in Romania] as South from Kaliakra [Bulgaria], the wind blows similarly, and the sun does not warm more in Albena [Bulgaria] than Mangalia [Romania], Bulgarians have clients, whereas we sing sorrow. [...] So that they [the owners of hotels in Romania] will watch how Bulgarians make money in May [...] and eventually will blame the treacherous mass media that make publicity to «cucumbers»" (Gândul, 06.05.2008).

Bulgaria as the 16th Soviet republic. Behind the Iron Curtain, Romanians have considered Bulgarians very submissive to the USSR. This image has resisted into Romanians' collective memory, as shown in a very biting commentary addressing the gas networks South Stream and Nabucco. "The Neighbor Bulgaria Warmed up by the Russian Heater" (Gândul, 22.01.2008) presents the dispute around these networks as a fight between Bad and Good. The description employs words with military connotations: "fight", "strike", "alliance", "hit". The Bad is the Russian network South Stream that excludes Romania, and the Good is the European Union's network Nabucco that includes Romania. Bulgaria's joining to the South Stream is considered "a slap on the Bucharest face":

"During communism we used to refer to Bulgaria as the 16th Soviet republic. It remains there, historically, the deep adhesion to the Soviet ideals, with the awkward moment when Zhivkov asked his country to join officially the USSR. It has been necessary 40 years, the NATO and the EU adhesion to officially legalize the loving relation between Sofia and Moscow. But, finally, Bulgaria has become formally the 13th state of CSI. "The documents" have been signed Friday, when the Kremlin tsar has come to the Bulgarian neighbors with pomp and the entire energetic arsenal". (Gândul, 22.01.2008)

Rombulgaria: Bulgaria and Romania in the same boat. "Rombulgaria" is the title of an article sarcastic about the regularity with which the foreign press perceives both countries alike in almost all respects. This constructed similarity is criticized, in general, by the entire Romanian press:

"[...] all news about our country: in the same package with Bulgaria."

“[...] At good and, mostly, at worst, Bucharest remains coupled at the same train with Sofia.” (Gândul, 19.12.2008)

Underlying this disapproval is the fear that Romania is disadvantaged by this imagined association: “As long as it remains a «poor and corrupt» conglomerate, Romania and Bulgaria do not have even the right to ask for explanations” (Gândul, 19.12.2008). The bad image of one country is seen as automatically translated to the other: “Interesting is that both publications [International Herald Tribune and The Telegraph] illustrate their theory [that both countries fraud the EU subsidies] only with Bulgarian examples” (Gândul, 18.11.2008). Across the border, the same fear is acknowledged: “In the beginning, Bulgaria has protested that Romania delayed it in the process of joining the EU” (Gândul, 19.12.2008).

## 7. BULGARIAN IMAGES OF ROMANIA

### *(1) Imagined opportunities related to the border*

For Bulgarian tourists, Romania does not seem to be a popular destination. Only one article presents Romania as a touristy spot, based on statistics (“Bulgarians Travel Mostly to Romania and Greece”, Novinar, 01.08.2008). The economic opportunity offered by the border proximity is not considered too profitable by Bulgarians. The Romanians, as well as other neighboring tourists, such as the Serbians, are considered poorer than the Western tourists. Only the global crisis appears as a true opportunity to attract Western, more affluent tourists in search of inexpensive vacations (Novinar, 26.09.2008). Nevertheless, the real estate investment of Romanians on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast is acknowledged by both border sides as an opportunity. “Romanians Buy Holiday Properties in Bulgaria” (Novinar, 16.09.08) shows that Romanians are attracted by the one-fifth cheaper prices of Bulgarian holiday estates.

A few articles deal with a subject that lacks on the Romanian side, namely the tourism industry developed in relation with the border. The tourism based on concerts can potentially attract neighboring tourists from Romania, Serbia, Turkey, and Greece (Novinar, 31.07.2008). The tourism along the Danube (Novinar, 17.07.2008), where Romania is mentioned once, though Danube represents around two thirds of the common border, mentions the possibility to cross the river by ferry, but does not provide any other information about sightseeing across the border.

Shopping is another opportunity offered by the border proximity. “Bulgarians Rush for Cheap Furniture Stores in Bucharest and Thessaloniki” (Novinar, 17.08.2008) is the title of an article that details furniture prices at IKEA in Bucharest (one hour-drive North from the border) and Thessaloniki (two-hour drive

South from the border), which are half those in Bulgaria. Although the quality of the furniture is considered low, its appearance seems “decent” (Novinar, 17.08.2008).

## ***(2) Imagined threats related to the border***

Threats are differently perceived across the border. Whereas pollution and smuggling induce anxiety in Romania, economic competition irritates Bulgarians. The “lack of order” and the “political corruption” are considered by the President of the Bulgarian Industrial Association the main reasons for which “Bulgarian investors direct their funds abroad, including [...] Romania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina” (“Employers Expect a Decline in New Foreign Investment”, Novinar, 27.08.2008). In the same vein, other commentary (Novinar, 20.08.2008) discusses the investors’ reasons to relocate to neighboring countries such as Romania and Serbia. Although Bulgaria has the cheapest labor force, other requirements such as “a decent business climate, no corruption and lack of bureaucracy” (Novinar, 20.08.2008) are not met. The bigger salaries in Romania prove that “our northern neighbor is not only a more attractive place for doing business, but also to live” (Novinar, 20.08.2008). Moreover, Romania, as well as other neighboring countries, has become a supplier of goods that once Bulgaria had in abundance, namely vegetables. The press complains the imminent disappearance of the traditional Bulgarian salad Shopska, since no ingredient is Bulgarian anymore (“Greek Salad Shopska”, Novinar, 25.08.2008). Shopska becomes thus a metaphor for Bulgaria’s decay from the first-ranked exporter of vegetables in the region to an importer from neighboring countries.

Abundant are the news about the decision of the Austrian metallurgical giant Voest Alpine to invest either in Romania or Bulgaria. The news presents Romania as a potential competitor in the process of attracting this company. However, on the Romanian border side, this topic is completely neglected. The news about the South Stream gas pipeline abounds, too. They perceive Romania as a rival in the South Stream network, because Romania’s participation to just Nabucco or both – Nabucco and South Stream – networks is seen as undecided. The articles (e.g., “Romania Is Not Denied from South Stream”, Novinar, 24.10.2008; “South Stream and Nabucco Come in Direct Combat”, Novinar, 29.10.2008) express the fear that Bulgaria may be replaced by Romania in South Stream, but they consider only the geographical reasons as determinant for a possible replacement of Bulgaria in South Stream: “Experts believe that the reorientation to Romania is economically justified as the route of the pipeline through the Romanian part of the Black Sea is shorter with 100 kilometers than the route through the Bulgarian part, so that the underwater part will cost with 12 percent less” (Novinar, 20.10.2008).

Another threat related to the border is the heavy pollution of the Black Sea (“Environmental Catastrophe Threatens Black Sea”, Novinar, 24.06.2008). Yet, this warning comes from an external source, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, not from Bulgarian sources. The article does not refer specifically to Romania or any other country as a cause of pollution. It only mentions the main rivers flowing into the sea, remarking that Danube, the border between Romania and Bulgaria, pollutes heavily the Black Sea. Thus, pollution seems on both border sides a weak threat. It does not represent a disputed issue.

### ***(3) Images of Cross-Border Cooperation***

There is not much talk about Cross-Border Cooperation programs. Only the old and new bridges are the subjects present on both border sides. Contrary to the Romanian border side, the tone of the news is not improbable and vague, but alert and clear in signaling two major problems. One is the “very poor condition” of the old bridge Giurgiu-Russe, considered a “danger of road accidents”, which is in “urgent need to find funds for the renovation” (“Emergency Repair of The Danube Bridge”, Novinar, 26.10.2008). The second is the reduction of the bridge transit fees (“Danube Bridge without Charges”, Novinar, 28.04.2008) by the Romanian authorities, who hinder the free movement in the European Community by raising the fees. Across the border, the Romanian news criticizes also the inflexibility of the Romanian local authorities regarding these fees.

The new bridge across Danube is mentioned only by a short text (Novinar, 06.08.2008) citing an official of the Bulgarian Ministry of Transport, who affirms that the bridge will be completely finished by 2010 (the bridge has been inaugurated in 2013).

A common project, overlooked on the Romanian border side, is the ferry connection between Zimnicea (Romania) and Svishtov (Bulgaria). “Lift Will Link Bulgaria with Romania” (Novinar, 10.10.2008) presents confidently the project: “According to Nikola Yankov of Economic Academy in Svishtov there will be no technical problems concerning the construction of the facility between the two sides”. It is worth mentioning that no words suggesting improbability come out in the presentation of this smaller and privately-led project.

### ***(4) Rankings***

Whereas Romanian news includes stereotypes, Bulgarian news abounds in rankings. The most frequent are dual comparisons between Romania and Bulgaria and rankings in which Romania’s place is emphasized. This suggests a competitor’s perspective and, thus, a certain economic concern



regarding the neighboring Romania. Several comparisons show that Romania is considered less developed than Bulgaria (a perception that also exists in a reversed way across the border). On the Romanian side, the dual comparisons are rare and the place of Bulgaria in rankings does not appear saliently. The Bulgaria-Romania tandem constructed by foreign news is present on both border sides. The following examples from the Bulgarian press illustrate these three types of relations: (a) dual comparisons, (b) rankings, and (c) the Bulgarian-Romanian tandem.

(a) The dual comparisons present, in general, Romania as little less developed than Bulgaria. It seems that the comparisons are used to criticize Bulgaria by offering the bad example of Romania. "Bulgaria is not only the least developed country in the EU but, even more, it has been lagged behind by countries such as Romania, which was behind" (Novinar, 02.11.2008). Other article considers the Bulgarian business sector as better developed than the Romanian one, pointing the fact that both countries joined the EU in the same time (Novinar, 10.09.2008). An article regarding the health strategies concerned with children mortality affirms that although Romania performs worse than Bulgaria, "this is not a cause for pride" (Novinar, 30.10.2008). The underlying assumption is that Romania ranks so low that being a step ahead it does not mean much. The similarity of bad medical services is stressed by other article: "The experts in Bulgaria say that the situation is similar to that in Romania, both countries have the worst performance among the EU countries" (Novinar, 02.10.2008).

The image of a slightly less developed Romania underlies even comments upon issues that seem to be solved better by Romania. "Even Romania [...] receives a higher mark for the fight with corruption" (Novinar, 25.06.2008, emphases added) implies – through the adverb "even" used intensive -- that Bulgarians actually consider Romania on a very low place in the fight against corruption. The same use of the adverb "even" connotes the low place of Romania: "Some investors argue that the situation in Bulgaria is even worse than in neighboring Romania" (Novinar, 11.05.2008, emphases added). The adverb "relatively" diminishes the good perception on Romania's dealing with ethnic issues in the comment about the "relatively successful way of Romania" in solving ethnic problems (Novinar, 10.06.2008). In general, Romania is considered as discriminating against Roma community, gays and patients with AIDS (Novinar, 08.09.2008).

Three articles though consider that Romania performs better than Bulgaria. One is an interview (Novinar, 07.08.2008) about the problem of registered religious sects in Bulgaria that offers, positively, the example of Romania where a threshold of only 22.000 participants is necessary to legally register a sect. Other article, "Romania is ahead of us" (Novinar, 22.07.2008) cites the EU officials who consider that "Romania is moving in the right direction". Another article discussing the big salary (3400 euros) of

the Kosovo president, compares it with the salary of the president of Romania (2500 euros), stating positively that it is smaller “although the gross domestic product per capita in our northern neighbor [Romania] is five times higher than in Kosovo” (Novinar, 05.09.08).

(b) Rankings abound in the Bulgarian news. The geography of these rankings spans mostly the neighboring region, but some of them extend to the EU and the entire world. The rankings specify explicitly Romania’s place, showing once again a more competitor’s perspective than on the Romanian side. It is worth highlighting the ways in which Romania appears in rankings, since they suggest that the reference to Romania is important:

- in direct relation with Bulgaria, when the rankings refer only to regional neighbors and EU countries (e.g., “Incomes of the Bulgarians are the lowest in the European Union, and the average wages in Bulgaria are twice lower than in Romania”, Novinar, 20.08.2008);
- in small groups of around three, four countries if the rankings refer to the whole world (e.g., “Only in 3 countries the world mortality due to heart disease does not diminish: Romania, Russia and Bulgaria”, Novinar, 17.09.2008; “In this indicator [drug users] the country [Bulgaria] is just ahead of Romania, Estonia, Slovakia and Austria”, Novinar, 03.12.2008).

The topics of these rankings cover wide social and economic concerns: corruption perception (Novinar, 14.12.2008), the most affected countries by global crisis (Novinar, 10.11.2008), countries with high usage of bank services (Novinar, 28.10.2008), tax evasion (Novinar, 16.09.2008), wealth (Novinar, 09.09.2008), average income (Novinar, 20.08.2008), countries by imports to Bulgaria (Novinar, 11.08.2008), investment in services (Novinar, 25.07.2008), business climate in Southeastern Europe (Novinar, 29.06.2008), performance of work duties (Novinar, 23.06.2008), price of book production (Novinar, 30.05.2008), nationality of registered workers in the Netherlands (Novinar, 12.08.2008), married couples per EU country (Novinar, 06.08.2008), health issues connected with the quality of life such as heart disease mortality (Novinar, 17.09.2008), number of deaths in hospitals per hour (Novinar, 24.06.2008).

(c) The Romania-Bulgaria tandem constructed by the foreign news is present on both border sides. Similar to the Romanian press, the Bulgarian press perceives this tandem as unfair for both countries “Bulgaria and Romania are the scapegoat of the processes running in the European Union” (Novinar, 22.07.2008). The Bulgarian articles emphasize more the negative perception of the EU and other external actors upon the common performance of Bulgaria and Romania.

## 8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the rush after “hard” capital to build the border region, the process of social construction of the Romanian-Bulgarian border region has been overlooked. As Perkmann (2003: 157) puts it: “[...] it does not matter whether a CBR [cross-border region] is built upon cultural or ethnic commonalities, a common historical background, existing functional interdependencies or a mere community of interests, as it is precisely the process of construction that matters”. Because of this neglect, the border cooperation still revolves around big-scale projects, with national impact. Even if, statistically, the absorption rate of EU funds for Cross-Border Cooperation is high, at a closer look, the number of small-scale projects that involve efficient local organizations and really foster face-to-face interaction across the border is small. This imbalance between locally- and nationally-oriented common projects is visible even when simply travelling in the border region: no bilingualism, no common summer events in the Black Sea touristy area, no mixed products in the shops closed to the border, to name but a few.

Starting from this imbalance and its visible signs in the border landscape, this article explores reciprocal representations of otherness -- Romanian images of Bulgaria and vice versa -- and assumes that people network across the border according to the stereotypes, nationalistic sentiments and other generalized representations shared by their own culture. The analysis covers the year 2008 due to its importance as the first year of CBC between the two countries as EU members and due to the fact that it can constitute a reference point for future inquiries into this borders' representations and it can enable thus comparative studies. Because of the lack of border news within the border region at that time, this study had to choose from the national newspapers the ones with a significant amount of news about the other side in general, not only about the border in particular, as the border news was scarce. As a result, the content of the analysis widened from representations of the border to representations of the other side. However, the focus remained on how both sides perceive each other, even if they do not inhabit only the border region.

The analysis shows that the border was an unnoticed topic in 2008, unable to cause neither big opportunities nor terrible threats. The not much news about the border may suggest the lack of problems in the border region. Nevertheless, several major issues, such as nuclear pollution, energy, the second bridge across Danube, the taxes imposed by the Romanian local authorities for the old bridge across Danube, the Vlach minority in Bulgaria, are topics still argued upon, but neglected by the press. The lack of news means thus more ignorance than contentment.

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The analysis explored four themes: (1) perceived opportunities related to border proximity; (2) perceived threats caused by border proximity; (3) perceptions of cross-border cooperation; (4) stereotypes:

- 1) On both border sides, shopping and tourism are considered the main chances offered by the border proximity. Although tourism is a good starting point for cross-border projects, it does not turn out to be as such in reality. Each side projects negative images upon the other one. For Bulgarians, the image of the Romanian tourist still remains the image of a poor, East European tourist, although Romanians are the most numerous tourists in Bulgaria<sup>2</sup> beginning with 2006 onward. For Romanians, Bulgaria is still perceived as a dangerous country for drivers due to the car thieves and to allegations of corrupt traffic police, although Romanians don't cease driving massively throughout Bulgaria, either to travel to Greece and Turkey, or to the Bulgarian sea resorts. Thus, tourism in this border region with significant geographical and historical values is not an incentive for cross-border projects.
- 2) Threats are not treated as major concerning issues. Whereas pollution and smuggling induce anxiety in Romania, economic competition irritates Bulgarians. However, the tone is pretty calm on both border sides, which suggests that the two sides do not perceive the debatable common issues as alarming conflicts.
- 3) Cooperation across the border is barely mentioned on both sides. The news refers only to the old and new bridges across Danube, which are large-scale projects involving national authorities and the EU. There is just one acknowledgment of a smaller-scale project, locally run, namely a new ferry connection between Zimnicea (Romania) and Shistov (Bulgaria). Worth mentioning here is the complete lack of information on the terrestrial border region (139,1 km in length), which has a rich potential of developing common tourism initiatives due to its proximity to the Black Sea Coast and to the less known, but valuable archeological patrimony existent on both border sides.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: National Statistics Institute in Bulgaria (<http://www.nsi.bg/otrasalen.php?otr=57>).

- 4) Regarding clichés, both countries consider themselves economically and socially superior to the other. Stereotypes appear often in the Romanian news (Bulgarians as peasants and as USSR's close friends), whereas rankings, in which Romania's place is clearly mentioned, abound in the Bulgarian news, suggesting a strong competitor's perspective. Both sides extremely dislike the tandem Romania-Bulgaria, constructed by the Western press around the EU integration process, and consider it unfair and detrimental to national interests.

Both border sides prove resistant to reorient regionally rather than nationally their human and economic capital. As Newman (2006: 181) puts it: "Not every trans-border region results in the meeting of minds. [...] Not all peripheral regions can, or want to be, transformed into transition zones". To redirect the capital toward geographically closer, but new and unknown opportunities across the border means to abandon known, though farther paths toward national attractors. Important reasons to resist reorientation, such as financial shortages and lack of institutional frameworks, are diminishing. There are sufficient funds provided by the European Union and national authorities, as well as institutional regulations to boost cross-border cooperation. As Anke Strúver (2002) rightly points out for the German-Dutch border is valid also in this case: the doors are open at the formal level, but closed at the level of stereotypical representations.

Further inquires can shed light upon the way in which perceptions have been changing across this border and the way in which they influenced the construction of the cross-border cooperation networks. Considering that each scientific explanation contains to some extent practical implications, this study points out that a crucial field that should be targeted by the regional policies in the Romania-Bulgaria case is the creation of a culture of trust, by means of changed discourses and informal networks. By paralleling in an effective way the big scale common projects with smaller scale, people-to-people projects, the border sides can direct their social capital toward each other rather than orienting it inland, so that the border region can really become a connecting zone that opens up opportunities for local development, with possible inland spillovers.

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