

BORDERLAND EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES IN CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract. *This paper examines how borderland regions in Central-Eastern Europe shape educational interactions among ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. Frontier areas such as Transylvania and Vojvodina function as historically layered "contact zones," where schooling continuously negotiates competing identities. Drawing on intercultural education theory, the concept of the contact zone, and models of bilingual and plurilingual instruction, the study analyzes the statistical landscape of minority education across Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, and Serbia, before turning to two in-depth case studies. The analysis identifies persistent challenges — linguistic disparities, monocultural curricula, and insufficient intercultural teacher training — alongside the structural tension in European Union policy between integration and the protection of minority identity. The paper concludes with directions for strengthening cross-border educational cooperation and closes the gap between European diversity discourse and local implementation.*

Keywords: *Borderland education, multicultural education, Central-Eastern Europe, minority education, intercultural competence, contact zone.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Over the centuries, the border regions of Central and Eastern Europe have been areas of ethnic, linguistic, and religious overlap, shaped by successive empires, repeated redrawing of borders, and population migrations. This historical legacy has created, in areas such as Transylvania and Vojvodina, structurally heterogeneous school communities where the educational process cannot be separated from the ongoing negotiation of competing identities (Thaler, 2001). Far from being mere administrative peripheries, these territories function as contact zones—social spaces where cultures meet, sometimes clash, and renegotiate one another, often under conditions of asymmetrical power (Pratt, 1991).

“Borderland education,” as used in this study, refers to the set of learning processes that occur in contexts characterized by cultural diversity and intense intercultural contact. These regions are not merely places where multiple ethnic groups coexist, but veritable social laboratories in which schools mediate—with varying degrees of success and failure—between loyalty to one’s identity of origin and integration into a broader national or European space (Örkény & Székelyi, 2016). In Central and Eastern Europe, the most relevant examples of this phenomenon are found in Transylvania,

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Vojvodina, and Galicia—regions that have experienced repeated changes in sovereignty over the past century and, along with them, successive reconfigurations of their educational systems.

This study aims to analyze these dynamics through three complementary lenses—historical, sociological, and pedagogical—to understand how border education both reflects and shapes interethnic relations in the region. The authors of this article have previously examined, from an institutional and comparative perspective, the architecture of education systems in the European Union (Barth & Țepelea, 2021), a context that revealed both the progress of European policies on educational inclusion and the persistence of significant disparities among national and ethnic minorities. The present study expands on this line of research, moving from the level of general European policies to the concrete level of border regions, where these policies are—or fail to be—translated into educational practice.

The structure of the article follows a progression from the conceptual framework to empirical analysis. After presenting the theoretical framework of intercultural education and the concept of the contact zone, the study reviews the statistical landscape of minority education in Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, and Serbia, in order to ground the discussion in a quantifiable context. Two case studies—Transylvania and Vojvodina—allow for an in-depth analysis of how the theoretical principles discussed are implemented at the regional level. The article concludes with a critical discussion of the challenges identified and concrete directions for the development of educational policies in the border regions of Central and Eastern Europe.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intercultural education, as a field of educational research, provides a necessary starting point for understanding the dynamics in border regions. James Banks proposes a conceptual framework of the “dimensions of multicultural education,” in which content integration, the process of knowledge construction, equitable pedagogy, and the school’s institutional culture are treated as interdependent elements, not as isolated initiatives (Banks, 2016). This perspective emphasizes that managing diversity is not merely a matter of adding content about minorities to the curriculum, but rather involves a structural transformation of how the school functions as an institution.

To complement this framework, research conducted under the auspices of the Council of Europe shows that schools can actively promote young people’s intercultural competence through a specific set of actions—encouraging interethnic friendships, organizing study periods in communities different from their own, and explicitly fostering the attitudes, values, and skills associated with intercultural dialogue (Barrett, 2018). This approach, which focuses on concrete competencies rather than mere declarative tolerance, provides a useful tool for evaluating the educational practices in the border regions analyzed in this study.

The concept of the “contact zone,” introduced by Mary Louise Pratt, remains one of the most influential theoretical tools for understanding educational spaces characterized by cultural plurality. A contact zone is defined as a social space where different cultures meet, clash, and negotiate, often under conditions of asymmetrical power (Pratt, 1991). Applied to the school setting, this idea suggests that a classroom in a border region is not a neutral space, but an active arena for identity negotiation, where practices such as autoethnography and transculturation become legitimate pedagogical tools, not merely anthropological curiosities.

The specific characteristics of Eastern European regions, however, require a nuanced interpretation of these theoretical frameworks, which were originally developed for Western contexts marked by recent migration. An analysis of intercultural education in post-communist Poland has shown that the only significant exception to the generic, context-disconnected treatment of this discipline was precisely the “border-type of intercultural education”—that linked to indigenous and secular ethnic communities, rather than to migratory flows (Bleszynska, 2008). Along the same lines, more recent pedagogical explorations of the transformations of intercultural education in Central European border regions emphasize the need for theoretical models that integrate the specific historical heritage of these territories (Rembierz, 2021).

The identity theory of the border provides a second conceptual pillar of this study. Identities in Central European border regions are described as fluid, contested, and dependent on the political context, rather than fixed and primordial (Thaler, 2001). This fluidity is confirmed by empirical research on ethnic minorities located along the Central and Eastern European border, which shows how minority groups actively manage their dual status—as a minority in the host country and, simultaneously, as a community symbolically linked to a neighboring (Örkény & Székelyi, 2016). The territorial dimension of this issue is also analyzed from the perspective of self-determination in the cross-border regions of Eastern and Central Europe (Harris, 2017), as well as from the perspective of the dual function of borders—as both connectors and dividers—within the European Union (Schmidt, 2022).

This dual function of the border—both connecting and separating—is also reflected at the institutional level, within the European legal framework dedicated to the protection of national minorities. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 2001/2004) establishes specific obligations for signatory states regarding access to education in the mother tongue, without, however, imposing a uniform model for implementation, which leaves room for divergent national interpretations of the same principle. This normative flexibility partly explains why educational policies for minorities differ so greatly between Romania, Hungary, and Serbia, even though all three are signatories to the same international instruments—an aspect that will be analyzed in detail in Part 3 of this paper.

Historically, Central European border regions have often functioned as provinces with distinct administrative and cultural systems, giving rise to persistent cultural regionalisms that have survived repeated changes in political sovereignty (Livezeanu et al., 2019). This institutional continuity largely explains why the educational systems in Transylvania and Vojvodina still retain, to this day, structural features inherited from the Austro-Hungarian and interwar periods, which are analyzed in detail in the case studies section. Cultural regionalism should not be understood, in this sense, as mere historical nostalgia, but rather as an active factor that continues to influence local educational policy decisions today—from the way school networks are organized to the institutional status granted to minority languages within local government.

It should also be noted that identity-based theories of the border and theories of multicultural education generally stem from distinct disciplinary traditions—sociology and political history, on the one hand, and the educational sciences, on the other—and are rarely brought into direct dialogue. This study aims precisely to bridge this gap, treating border education not merely as a descriptive pedagogical category, but as a social phenomenon rooted in the region’s political history, which cannot be fully understood

without the conceptual tools provided by the sociology of identity and the political geography of borders.

An additional theoretical dimension, often underestimated in the literature on frontier education, concerns the role of teachers as key actors in the implementation of any intercultural policy. The report “Fostering Teachers’ Intercultural and Democratic Competences for a More Inclusive Society” (European Commission, Joint Research Center, 2023) shows that, no matter how well-defined the regulatory or curricular frameworks may be, the effectiveness of intercultural education ultimately depends on the teacher’s actual intercultural competence in the classroom—a competence that requires specific training, not just good intentions. Empirical studies on initial teacher education, however, reveal a persistent gap between the stated objectives of training programs and the actual intercultural competence of program graduates—a gap that persists even in educational systems considered high-performing at the European level.

The final theoretical framework relevant to this study concerns models of bilingual and multilingual education. The literature distinguishes between additive approaches, which develop the second language without undermining the mother tongue, and subtractive approaches, which tend to replace the student’s first language (García, 2009). This distinction is essential for border regions, where instruction in the minority language is not merely a pedagogical tool but a prerequisite for preserving community identity. Additive models typically require substantial bilingual teaching resources, teachers qualified in both languages, and explicit institutional recognition of the value of the minority language—conditions that are not uniformly met in the regions analyzed.

At the European policy level, the publication “Education Begins with Language” (European Commission, 2020b) sets the goal that all graduates of compulsory education should know, in addition to their mother tongue, two foreign languages by 2025, with an explicit focus on children from national minorities and disadvantaged families—a policy direction that will be critically revisited in Chapter 5, when we discuss the tension between integration and the protection of minority identity. It is important to note that this objective frames multilingualism more as an individual skill useful for European mobility than as a collective right tied to the identity of a minority community—a conceptual distinction that, in border regions, may generate tensions that are difficult to anticipate at the level of general European policy.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks—institutional multicultural education, action-oriented intercultural competence, the contact zone, the identity theory of the frontier, the European normative framework for the protection of minorities, teachers’ intercultural competence, and additive language models—provide the conceptual tools necessary for the empirical analysis that follows, which is structured around the available statistical data and the two regional case studies.

3. STATISTICAL DATA ON BORDER EDUCATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The transition from the conceptual framework to empirical analysis requires a preliminary methodological clarification. Statistics on the education of national minorities in Central and Eastern Europe come from diverse sources—national statistical offices, reports from ministries of education, and European agencies—and are not always directly comparable across countries due to differing definitions of ethnic and linguistic categories. For this reason, where exact national data could not be independently verified

through a primary institutional source, they are presented below as indicative estimates, intended to outline general trends rather than definitive figures.

At the European Union level, the general trend shows a steady increase in the proportion of students with a migrant background or belonging to a national or ethnic minority, which is more pronounced in border regions than within the member states (Eurostat, *Migrant Integration Statistics — Education, 2024–2026*). This general trend, however, takes on a different meaning when analyzed separately for each of the four countries in the region under study—Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, and Serbia—since each has its own history of dealing with its national minorities.

Data on early childhood education provide a useful indicator of how European education systems, in practice, address the principle of inclusion that is affirmed in policy statements. At the European Union level, the average percentage of children enrolled in early childhood education, aged 4 to 7, has reached 94.8%, while for children from disadvantaged families or from the Roma minority, the percentage drops to 42% (European Commission, *Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 2020a*). This gap of more than 50 percentage points, which holds true across the entire Union, is also found—albeit to varying degrees—in the border regions analyzed in this study, where the overlap between socioeconomic vulnerability and ethnic background frequently exacerbates inequalities in access to quality education.

Romania is host to more than twenty officially recognized national minorities, and a significant portion of the school-age population attends classes in their native language—Hungarian, German, Ukrainian, Slovak, or Romani—with available estimates placing this proportion in pre-university education at just under a quarter of all students, with significant regional variations, particularly in Transylvania. Alongside these “historical” minorities, the Roma minority remains, statistically, the group most affected by educational exclusion throughout the European Union, not just in Romania: only 42% of Roma children participate in early childhood education, compared to a European average of 94.8%, and the dropout rate in secondary education reaches 72% among Roma children, compared to a European average of 10.2% (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey — Roma: Selected Findings, 2016*; Eurostat, online data code [educ_uoe_enra10]). This gap, which is much wider than that reported for any other minority in the region, shows that ethnicity alone does not fully explain educational inequalities—socioeconomic status plays an equally important, if not more important, role than formal ethnicity.

Hungary operates a comprehensive bilingual education system; available estimates indicate a significant proportion of bilingual students nationwide, supported by a network of dozens of schools that offer partial or full instruction in Romanian, Slovak, Croatian, or Serbian, concentrated primarily in the regions bordering these countries. Over the past few decades, the national and local media in Hungary have consistently covered the topic of the border region with Romania as a space for active identity negotiation, rather than as a mere administrative issue (Baranyi, 2007), which suggests that public interest in cross-border education extends beyond the strictly technical sphere of school policies.

Prior to 2022, Ukraine represented a unique case in the region, with a significant number of students enrolled in educational programs in minority languages—including the Romanian and Hungarian communities concentrated in Transcarpathia and Chernivtsi. The Russian invasion of 2022 radically changed this landscape: a substantial

number of Ukrainian students were integrated into the education systems of European Union member states, including Romania and Hungary, creating additional logistical and pedagogical challenges for the education systems in border regions — challenges that go beyond the usual framework of education for national minorities and are more akin to that of education for refugees.

Serbia provides education in six officially recognized minority languages, with this diversity particularly concentrated in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, where the Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, and Croatian communities maintain their own school networks, often in parallel with those of the Serbian majority. Research on the educational migration of Southeast European minorities shows, however, that these parallel networks face constant demographic pressure caused by the emigration of young people from minority groups to neighboring countries of origin or to Western Europe, a phenomenon that threatens the long-term institutional sustainability of minority-language education in Vojvodina (Lendák-Kabók et al., 2020).

Beyond country-specific figures, the border regions of Central and Eastern Europe share a common structural feature: they often function as distinct administrative zones with their own regional identity, which influences the organization of school networks independently of general national education policy (Kukorelli et al., 2000). This informal regionalization of border education is also confirmed by research on border identity in the Republic of Moldova and the Western Balkans, which reveals similar patterns of institutional negotiation of linguistic diversity in a cross-border context, even beyond the borders of the European Union (Brie, 2021, 2023, 2024).

One additional methodological point is worth noting: direct comparisons between the four countries should be interpreted with caution, as their statistical reporting systems differ significantly. Romania and Hungary, as European Union member states, report harmonized data through Eurostat, which facilitates comparability. Serbia, which is still in the process of accession, and Ukraine, which is in the midst of an active conflict, often report through national channels or through international agencies such as UNICEF or UNHCR, using methodologies that are not always aligned with Eurostat standards. This methodological asymmetry is, in itself, an indirect reflection of the four countries' varying degrees of European integration.

Cross-border educational cooperation, however, offers a positive indicator that partially offsets the picture of disparities presented above. Across the European Union as a whole, international mobility among teachers and students reached, during the 2014–2020 period, 200,000, with over 1,000 universities and high schools benefiting annually; each monitored educational institution had at least four cooperation agreements with institutions outside the European Union (European Commission, Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 2020a). Although these figures are not available broken down by border regions, qualitative estimates suggest that regions such as Transylvania and Vojvodina, precisely because of their geographical location and multilingual tradition, benefit disproportionately from these mobility programs compared to monocultural regions within the same countries.

Taken together, these statistical data paint a mixed picture: on the one hand, the legal and institutional framework for the education of national minorities is relatively well developed in all four countries analyzed; on the other hand, actual implementation remains uneven, affected by demographic constraints, migration, and, in the case of the Roma minority, by a structural marginalization far more profound than that experienced by “historical” national minorities. This tension between the regulatory framework and

practical reality is explored in depth in the following parts through an analysis of two regional case studies—Transylvania and Vojvodina—which provide a more nuanced understanding of the specific mechanisms through which border education functions or fails to function.

4. CASE STUDIES: TRANSYLVANIA AND VOJVODINA

The two regions chosen for in-depth analysis—Transylvania and Vojvodina—were not selected at random. Both have experienced repeated changes in political sovereignty over the past century, both are home to large ethnic communities with well-organized institutions, and both have developed, over time, distinct multicultural educational traditions that set them apart from the rest of the national territory to which they belong. A comparison of the two regions allows us to identify both mechanisms common to border education and specific characteristics unique to each national context.

From the perspective of the linguistic models discussed above, both regions offer predominantly additive examples of bilingual education—students belonging to minority groups learn their mother tongue alongside, not at the expense of, the state’s official language. This institutional choice, common to both Transylvania and Vojvodina, contrasts with the more subtractive practices observed in other European contexts, where the minority language is treated as an obstacle rather than as a pedagogical resource (García, 2009). However, as the following case studies show, the choice of an additive model at the level of declarative policy does not, in and of itself, guarantee the teaching resources and qualified teachers necessary for its effective implementation.

4.1. Transylvania

The multicultural tradition of Transylvanian education has deep institutional roots, the best-documented example being that of the Saxon minority. Historical analyses show that, beginning in the 19th century, the Transylvanian Saxons developed their own school system, structured according to Western European principles, which were introduced through German universities, and this system served as an early model of multicultural education based on European principles, long before this concept was academically theorized (Sassu & Stanciu-Păscărița, 2020). This institutional legacy largely explains Transylvania’s reputation as a region with a particularly well-developed minority school infrastructure compared to other regions of Romania, an infrastructure that today supports parallel educational networks in Hungarian and German, alongside smaller communities—Ukrainian, Slovak, and Romani—with available estimates indicating over a thousand educational institutions operating partially or entirely in minority languages across the region.

Alongside the “historical” minorities—the Hungarian and German communities—an analysis of education in the border regions of Transylvania cannot overlook the situation of the Roma minority, which is the most vulnerable in terms of education. A recent study, conducted right on the Romanian-Serbian border, shows how the social construction of Roma “otherness” in multi-ethnic rural communities continues to be marked by persistent prejudices, even in the context of long-standing ethnic diversity that appears to be well integrated institutionally (Crețan, Covaci & Jucu, 2023). This finding qualifies the often-idyllic image of Transylvania as a model of interethnic coexistence: the historical coexistence of several “recognized” ethnic groups—Hungarians, Germans, Romanians—does not automatically translate into a similar level

of inclusion for the Romani minority, which remains, statistically and socially, in a structurally different position.

The qualitative estimates available for the region suggest a significant minority school infrastructure—in the range of over a thousand educational institutions that operate partially or entirely in Hungarian, German, or Ukrainian, serving several hundred thousand students at the regional level. Although these figures could not be verified through a single, primary, and up-to-date statistical source, they are consistent with the order of magnitude reported by national sources regarding the total number of Hungarian-language schools in Romania, the overwhelming majority of which are concentrated in Transylvania. Regardless of the exact precision of these figures, the trend they confirm is clear: Transylvania remains, within the entire European Union, one of the regions with the densest institutional network of multilingual minority education.

Another specific feature of Transylvania is the role that education in the mother tongue plays in maintaining a symbolic connection with the neighboring nation-state, particularly in the case of the Hungarian community. This dynamic is concretely manifested through the existence of educational networks that, beyond their purely pedagogical function, play an active role in preserving Hungarian national identity at the regional level, a phenomenon documented by research on ethnic identities along the borders of Central and Eastern Europe (Örkény & Székelyi, 2016).

4.2. Vojvodina

The autonomous province of Vojvodina, located in northern Serbia, is likely the region's most complex multiethnic laboratory, home—according to available estimates—to communities belonging to more than twenty recognized ethnic groups, with a particularly high concentration of the Hungarian population in the northern districts. The roots of Vojvodina's current multi-ethnic educational structure, much like those in Transylvania, are deeply anchored in history: research on the construction of national identity through the teaching of history and geography during the interwar period shows how the redrawing of borders after World War I transformed the daily lives of the region's inhabitants, and schools became, even from that period onward, an active arena for negotiating the new Yugoslav national identity among children aged seven to ten (Koljanin, Šimunović-Bešlin & Čović, 2020).

This historical legacy explains the continued existence, to this day, of robust parallel school systems, supported by both the Serbian state and the home countries of the minorities—Hungary, first and foremost. Research on early childhood education among the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, however, reveals significant demographic pressure: successive censuses have recorded a steady decline in the Hungarian population in the region, calling into question the long-term viability of some of the Hungarian-language schools and kindergartens, despite the joint legislative efforts of the Serbian and Hungarian governments to counteract this decline (Mikuska & Raffai, 2018). The situation in Vojvodina thus confirms a tension already identified in Section 3: the existence of a legal framework favorable to minority education does not, in and of itself, guarantee the institutional sustainability of such education when demographic factors work against it.

A useful conceptual model for understanding the dynamics in Vojvodina is that of the “regional crossover,” which shows how spatial proximity and cultural affinity among ethnic groups in an East-Central European border region give rise to specific forms of informal cooperation that transcend official institutional frameworks (Berceanu,

Popa & Crețan, 2023). Applied to education, this model suggests that the success of minority school networks in Vojvodina does not depend exclusively on Serbian or Hungarian national policies, but also on informal social networks, cooperation at the local community level, and shared cultural practices that transcend formal administrative boundaries — including educational initiatives based on artistic creativity, which are increasingly used as a tool for strengthening border identity in the region (Bieńkowska, 2021).

Available estimates for Vojvodina indicate that tens of thousands of students are enrolled in minority-language education systems, distributed across several dozen educational institutions, with a particularly high proportion from the Hungarian community, followed by the Slovak, Romanian, and Croatian communities. Compared to Transylvania, where the minority school system is overwhelmingly dominated by the Hungarian community, followed by the German community, Vojvodina presents a more fragmented ethnic picture, with six minority languages officially recognized in education—a structural difference that partly explains why the coordination of educational policies for minorities is, in Vojvodina, institutionally more complex than in Transylvania, where the number of communities with their own substantial school networks is considerably smaller.

In conclusion, a comparison of the two case studies reveals a common pattern: in both regions, the institutional infrastructure for minority education is relatively solid, stemming from a long-standing historical tradition, but its long-term sustainability depends on factors that go beyond the strictly educational sphere—demographic pressure, emigration, as well as the persistence of forms of exclusion that disproportionately affect the Roma minority, regardless of the region or host country analyzed. These findings set the stage for the critical discussion in the following section, which will explicitly examine the policy tensions generated by this situation.

5. CHALLENGES, POLITICAL TENSIONS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The theoretical and statistical analyses, along with the two case studies, point to a set of structural challenges common to the entire region under analysis, regardless of the host state. This part summarizes these challenges, places them within the broader context of European policy tensions regarding national minorities, and concludes by proposing concrete directions for the development of border education in Central and Eastern Europe.

A common thread linking the two case studies—and one that deserves to be explicitly highlighted before moving on to the analysis of specific challenges—is the dual nature of frontier education: on the one hand, a factor in preserving community identity, essential to the cultural survival of minorities; on the other hand, a potential factor in social fragmentation, when parallel school networks operate in isolation, without genuine bridges of communication between communities. The “contact zone” theorized by Pratt (1991) is therefore not a static feature of border regions, but rather a fragile balance that can evolve either toward a healthy form of intercultural coexistence or toward *de facto* educational segregation, depending on the specific educational policy decisions made at the local and national levels.

Several challenges have been identified, related to those presented earlier. The first structural challenge identified is linguistic disparity, specifically unequal access to high-quality educational resources in the minority’s native language. As illustrated by the

conceptual framework of the dimensions of multicultural education (Banks, 2016), an inclusive educational policy requires more than the formal recognition of the right to instruction in one's mother tongue—it requires the actual integration of curriculum content, up-to-date textbooks, and teaching materials appropriate for each minority language. In the regions analyzed, this condition is met unevenly: Hungarian communities, with a publishing and institutional infrastructure supported by the mother country, benefit from far more substantial resources than smaller communities, such as the Ukrainian community in Transylvania or the Croatian community in Vojvodina.

The second challenge concerns the often monocultural nature of the national curriculum, even in regions with a long tradition of multi-ethnicity. The history and geography curriculum, in particular, tends to reflect the dominant national perspective, downplaying or omitting the historical contributions of minorities to the region's development—a dynamic already documented for the interwar period in the case of Vojvodina (Koljanin, Šimunović-Bešlin & Čović, 2020), but which remains, in more subtle forms, relevant to the contemporary curriculum as well. For this reason, curriculum reform remains an area in which progress in European policies on educational inclusion is noticeably slower than in the area of formal access to education in the mother tongue.

The third challenge—perhaps the most persistent one—concerns the insufficient training of teachers in intercultural competencies. Recent analyses of teacher training in the context of international policy show that, although efforts invested in initial and continuing education programs have steadily increased, the gap between the stated objectives of these programs and the actual, assessable intercultural competence of graduates remains substantial (European Commission, Joint Research Center, 2023; “Intercultural Teacher Education in an International Policy Context: Challenges and Opportunities,” 2025). This finding is particularly relevant for border regions, where teachers often find themselves teaching students from multiple linguistic and ethnic communities in the same classroom—a pedagogical complexity for which standard initial training, designed for monolingual classrooms, remains insufficiently adapted.

Beyond these three practical challenges, a critical analysis of European policies reveals a deeper structural tension, as previously anticipated in this article: the European Union's constant oscillation between an integration agenda—centered on mobility and transferable individual skills—and an agenda for the protection of minority identities—centered on collective rights and cultural preservation. The European goal of individual multilingualism by 2025 (European Commission, “Education Begins with Language”, 2020b) illustrates precisely this tension: the policy is formulated in terms of individual competence useful for European mobility, not in terms of a collective right of the minority community to preserve its own language as a tool for school instruction. This choice of wording is not accidental—it reflects a broader European institutional preference for frameworks that do not raise issues of national sovereignty, thereby avoiding direct confrontation with the politically sensitive issue of the collective rights of national minorities.

This structural tension is also directly reflected in the gap between the European discourse on diversity—which is coherent, ambitious, and well-articulated in principle—and its implementation at the local level, where resources, national political will, and institutional capacity vary significantly from one country to another. The case of the Roma minority remains the most telling example of this gap: although the European legal framework for Roma inclusion has been in place for over a decade,

concrete educational indicators—such as the early childhood education enrollment rate and the school dropout rate—show a much slower improvement than what was promised in official statements.

The uneven level of institutional capacity development among the four countries analyzed further exacerbates this tension. Romania and Hungary, as members of the European Union, have access to structural funding explicitly dedicated to educational inclusion, including through programs such as Erasmus+, which enables them to engage in medium- and long-term institutional planning. Serbia and Ukraine, which find themselves in far more fragile geopolitical positions—the former in a protracted accession process, the latter in a context of active conflict—do not enjoy the same predictability of funding, which translates, at the level of schools in Vojvodina or in Ukrainian regions with minority populations, a greater reliance on bilateral funding provided by the minorities' home countries—a solution that works in the short term but is vulnerable to shifts in political priorities within those countries.

Based on these findings, we propose several concrete directions for the development of educational policy in the border regions of Central and Eastern Europe.

- The first direction concerns strengthening teachers' intercultural training through an initial training curriculum specifically tailored to the realities of multiethnic and multilingual classrooms, rather than relying solely on generic “education for diversity” modules—a recommendation explicitly supported by research on the intercultural competence of future European teachers.

- The second approach aims to expand bilingual and multilingual education programs beyond large “historical” communities to smaller communities, which are often neglected for purely demographic reasons, following the additive model discussed before (García, 2009).

- The third area, perhaps the most promising in the medium term, concerns cross-border university cooperation: the recent experience of European university alliances—41 such consortia were created in the 2019–2020 period alone, bringing together the resources of 280 universities across the European Union (European Commission, Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 2020a) — demonstrates an institutional model that can be replicated at the level of universities in border regions, capable of generating innovative curricula that are sensitive to the local context through direct cooperation between institutions on both sides of national borders.

- A fourth approach, complementary to the other three, would consist of systematically leveraging educational initiatives based on artistic creativity as a tool for strengthening border identity (Bieńkowska, 2021)—an approach that, unlike formal curriculum reform, can be implemented quickly at the local level without requiring major legislative changes.

These directions do not, in and of themselves, resolve the structural tension between integration and the protection of minority identity identified above—a tension that ultimately remains a political choice, not merely an educational one. They do, however, provide a practical framework through which educational systems in border regions can gradually bridge the gap between the European discourse on diversity and the everyday reality of multiethnic classrooms in Transylvania, Vojvodina, and similar regions in Central and Eastern Europe.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to analyze border education in Central and Eastern Europe through three complementary lenses — historical, sociological, and pedagogical — based on the premise that regions such as Transylvania and Vojvodina cannot be understood as mere administrative peripheries, but rather as contact zones in the sense theorized by Pratt (1991), where schools constantly mediate between community identity and integration into a broader national or European framework.

An analysis of the theoretical framework has shown that the literature on multicultural education—developed primarily for Western contexts marked by recent migration—requires significant adaptation when applied to Eastern European regions, where ethnic diversity is, in most cases, indigenous and long-standing (Bleszynska, 2008). Statistical data confirmed the existence of a relatively well-developed legal framework for the education of national minorities in the four countries analyzed, but also the persistence of significant gaps—the most pronounced of which affects the Roma minority, whose educational participation rates remain substantially below the European average (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016).

Case studies on Transylvania and Vojvodina have revealed a common pattern: a solid institutional infrastructure, inherited from a long historical tradition of multi-ethnic coexistence, but whose long-term sustainability remains contingent on factors that go beyond the strictly educational sphere—demographic pressure, the emigration of young people from minority groups, and the unequal institutional capacity of host states. The critical discussion placed these findings within the broader context of a structural tension in European politics, oscillating between an integration agenda centered on individual mobility and a less explicitly acknowledged agenda of protecting the collective identity of national minorities.

The proposed areas of development—strengthening intercultural training for teachers, expanding bilingual programs beyond major communities, cross-border university cooperation, and leveraging educational initiatives based on artistic creativity—do not constitute a comprehensive solution to the identified tensions, but they do provide a practical framework, applicable in the medium term, through which educational systems in border regions can bridge the gap between the European discourse on diversity and the local institutional reality.

Ultimately, this study confirms that frontier education remains a field in which progress cannot be measured solely by quantitative indicators—such as the number of schools, the percentage of students enrolled in bilingual programs—but requires an ongoing qualitative assessment of how these institutions succeed, or fail, to transform the contact zone from a space of latent tension into a space of genuine intercultural coexistence. Future research could explore this line of inquiry further through empirical field studies conducted directly in schools within the analyzed regions, which would complement the institutional and statistical picture provided by the present study with the concrete perspectives of the students, teachers, and parents involved daily in this negotiation of identity.

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