

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN BORDER AREAS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

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Abstract. *The border regions of South-East Europe represent some of the most dynamic and culturally diverse spaces within the contemporary European landscape, where ethnic, linguistic, religious and historical particularities continue to shape social interaction, regional cooperation and identity construction. In the context of globalization, migration dynamics and European integration, intercultural dialogue and diversity management have become essential instruments for social cohesion, inclusion and societal resilience. This paper examines the role of interculturalism and multiculturalism in border areas, with particular emphasis on the Romanian–Hungarian border space and the broader East-Central and South-East European context. Using a qualitative, interdisciplinary design that combines literature review, policy analysis, comparative reasoning and an illustrative case study, the research assesses how cultural diplomacy, intercultural education and institutional cooperation can reduce fragmentation, combat stereotypes and strengthen mutual trust. It argues that diversity is neither inherently a security threat nor automatically a social asset: outcomes depend on the quality of governance, everyday interaction and inclusive institutions. Intercultural dialogue should therefore be understood not merely as a cultural or educational dimension, but as a strategic component of societal security and European integration in border regions.*

Keywords: *intercultural dialogue, diversity management, border regions, social inclusion, societal security, European integration.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Border regions are not simply peripheral territories located at the external or internal margins of states. They are socially produced spaces in which political boundaries, historical memories, mobility patterns and multiple identities overlap. In South-East Europe, borders frequently connect communities that share economic interests, cultural practices and family networks, while simultaneously recalling periods of conflict, exclusion and competing national projects. This dual character makes borderlands particularly useful for analysing how diversity is transformed either into cooperation and social capital or into mistrust and fragmentation. The central premise of this article, derived from the conference presentation on which it is based, is that border regions are places where identity, inclusion and security intersect (Newman, 2006: 143–148; Paasi, 2011: 11–15).

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The relevance of the topic has increased because contemporary European societies are shaped by migration, population mobility, demographic change, urbanisation and transnational communication. On 1 January 2025, 46.7 million people living in the European Union had been born outside the EU, while another 18.0 million had been born in an EU Member State other than the one in which they lived. These figures do not describe border regions alone, yet they demonstrate that cultural diversity is embedded in the demographic structure of Europe rather than confined to exceptional localities. In regions situated along national borders, mobility and diversity are often even more visible because residents cross boundaries for employment, education, health care, trade, family life and cultural events (Eurostat, 2025).

Diversity, however, does not produce a predetermined political or social outcome. The same ethnic, linguistic or religious plurality may coexist with stable institutions and strong interpersonal trust in one region, while being interpreted through stereotypes and security fears in another. As the analytical statement formulated in the presentation emphasises, diversity is not automatically a risk or an advantage; its effects depend on how societies manage interaction, trust and inclusion. This observation calls for a shift from treating diversity as a static demographic fact to analysing the institutional and communicative processes through which difference acquires meaning (Vertovec, 2010: 83–87; 92–94).

The paper addresses four related questions. First, how does intercultural dialogue contribute to social inclusion? Second, what role does diversity management play in border areas? Third, can intercultural policies strengthen societal security? Fourth, how does cross-border cooperation support European integration? These questions link cultural policy to the study of security and regional cooperation. They also respond to the practical concern that inclusion is not achieved by declarations alone, but through institutions, education, representation, access to public services and repeated interaction among communities.

The argument is developed in eight parts. Following this introduction, the paper clarifies the concepts of multiculturalism, interculturalism, borders and societal security. It then explains the qualitative methodology and presents South-East Europe as a borderland of diversity. A section on demographic and policy evidence situates the discussion within contemporary European transformations. The Romanian–Hungarian border area, with specific reference to the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar and Oradea–Debrecen relationship, is examined as an illustrative case. The subsequent analysis identifies challenges, opportunities and mechanisms linking dialogue to resilience. The final sections formulate policy recommendations and conclusions.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: FROM COEXISTENCE TO INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION

Multiculturalism and interculturalism are related but analytically distinct approaches. Multiculturalism generally recognises the presence and rights of different cultural groups within the same political community. Its normative contribution is important because it challenges assimilationist assumptions and affirms that equal citizenship does not require cultural uniformity. Nevertheless, critics have argued that a model centred only on the recognition of separate communities can insufficiently address interaction, shared public spaces and the risk of parallel social lives. Interculturalism places greater emphasis on communication, reciprocal learning and the creation of

common practices across cultural boundaries (Vertovec, 2010: 83–95; Meer and Modood, 2011: 175–181).

The Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue defines dialogue as an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage. It presents intercultural dialogue as a means of promoting mutual understanding, cooperation, participation and social cohesion while respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. This formulation is particularly relevant for border regions because their inhabitants often negotiate several levels of belonging at once: local, regional, national, minority, European and transnational (Council of Europe, 2008: 10–13).

Diversity management refers here to the set of public policies, institutional practices and social mechanisms used to ensure that cultural differences do not translate into unequal access, exclusion or structural vulnerability. It includes anti-discrimination measures, minority rights, language access, inclusive education, migrant integration, representation in decision-making, cultural diplomacy and support for civil-society initiatives. In a border context, diversity management also involves cross-border governance, because many everyday problems and opportunities cannot be addressed adequately by institutions operating exclusively within one state (Council of Europe, 2008: 4–7; 11–20).

Border studies have moved beyond the image of the border as a fixed line separating sovereign territories. Newman shows that borders continue to separate societies even under conditions of globalisation, but also argues that their meanings and functions change through political and social processes (Newman, 2006: 143–161). Paasi similarly conceptualises boundaries as institutions that are reproduced through narratives, symbols, administrative practices and everyday life (Paasi, 2011: 11–31). Rumford's work on theorising borders highlights that borders are increasingly dispersed and experienced through multiple sites rather than only at territorial edges (Rumford, 2006: 155–169). These perspectives help explain why an open internal EU border may remain socially significant even when physical controls are reduced.

The security dimension is developed through the concept of societal security. In the Copenhagen School framework, societal security concerns the ability of a society to preserve essential patterns of language, culture, association, religious and national identity under changing conditions. The concept has sometimes been used in ways that frame migration or minority claims as threats. This paper adopts a different, inclusion-oriented interpretation: long-term societal security depends on the capacity of communities to preserve identity while participating in a shared democratic order. Security is therefore not produced by suppressing difference, but by building institutions that allow differences to be expressed without becoming sources of exclusion or violent mobilisation (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 119–140).

This relationship can be summarised as a sequence: intercultural dialogue supports social inclusion; inclusion strengthens social cohesion; cohesion contributes to societal resilience. The sequence is not automatic and should not be read as a linear law. Dialogue without equal access may become symbolic, while inclusion policies without meaningful participation can remain technocratic. The model nevertheless provides a useful analytical structure for assessing how culture and security interact (Council of Europe, 2008: 3–4; 16–18; 36–40).

Figure 1. Analytical model: intercultural dialogue, inclusion, cohesion and societal resilience

(Source: author's elaboration based on the conceptual framework developed from Council of Europe (2008); Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) and Vertovec (2010))

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing importance of intercultural dialogue and diversity management has generated an extensive body of interdisciplinary literature spanning European Studies, Sociology, Political Science, Border Studies and Security Studies. While early research primarily focused on multiculturalism as a framework for recognising minority rights and protecting cultural identities, more recent scholarship increasingly emphasises interculturalism, which promotes interaction, dialogue and shared participation among culturally diverse communities (Kymlicka, 1995: 10–26; Meer and Modood, 2011: 175–181).

One of the central debates concerns the relationship between multiculturalism and interculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995: 108–130) argues that liberal democracies require institutional recognition of minority cultures in order to ensure genuine equality. However, subsequent authors suggest that recognition alone is insufficient if cultural groups remain socially separated (Meer and Modood, 2011: 176–183) contend that interculturalism complements rather than replaces multiculturalism by encouraging communication, reciprocity and everyday interaction between communities. Similarly, (Vertovec, 2010: 83–95) argues that increasing social complexity and "super-diversity" require governance models capable of managing multiple identities simultaneously rather than relying exclusively on traditional multicultural approaches.

Border Studies scholars have also significantly contributed to understanding intercultural relations (Newman, 2006: 143–161; Paasi, 2011: 11–31; Rumford, 2006: 155–169) demonstrate that borders are no longer understood merely as territorial lines separating sovereign states. Instead, borders function as dynamic social institutions continuously reproduced through political practices, historical narratives and everyday interactions. Their work highlights that European internal borders simultaneously facilitate mobility and preserve symbolic distinctions, making them particularly suitable environments for analysing intercultural dialogue.

From the perspective of Security Studies, the Copenhagen School introduced the concept of societal security, referring to the ability of communities to preserve their identity under changing political and social conditions (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 119–140). Although societal security has sometimes been associated with the securitisation of migration and minority issues, more recent research argues for an inclusive interpretation, where social cohesion, democratic participation and institutional trust constitute the foundations of long-term security rather than cultural homogeneity (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 23–26; 119–140).

European institutions have further expanded this perspective through policy documents promoting intercultural dialogue and inclusion (Council of Europe, 2008: 10–18) defines intercultural dialogue as a continuous process of respectful exchange based on human rights, democracy and equal dignity. Likewise, the European Commission's *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027* presents integration as a two-way process involving migrants, host communities and public institutions (European

Commission, 2020: 4–20). The mid-term review published in 2025 further emphasises that successful inclusion requires coordinated policies addressing education, employment, housing and civic participation rather than isolated cultural initiatives (European Commission, 2025).

Despite the substantial literature on multiculturalism, migration and border governance, relatively fewer studies integrate these perspectives within the specific context of South-East European border regions. Existing research frequently examines minority rights, migration management or cross-border cooperation separately. Less attention has been devoted to analysing how intercultural dialogue simultaneously contributes to social inclusion, societal resilience and European integration in border areas. This paper seeks to address that gap by combining insights from Border Studies, Intercultural Communication and Security Studies within the illustrative case of the Romanian–Hungarian border region.

4. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a qualitative and interdisciplinary research design combining European Studies, Security Studies and Intercultural Communication. This design is appropriate because the research problem cannot be reduced to a single variable or measured exclusively through demographic indicators. Intercultural dialogue involves meanings, institutional arrangements and social relationships, while societal resilience is influenced by political, economic and historical contexts (Creswell, 2018: 42–47; 73–76).

Four methods are employed. First, a literature review identifies conceptual approaches to borders, multiculturalism, interculturalism and societal security. Second, policy analysis examines the Council of Europe's intercultural framework, the European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027, Eurostat demographic evidence and the Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027. Third, comparative reasoning is used to situate the Romanian–Hungarian border within the broader South-East and East-Central European context. Fourth, an illustrative case study explores the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar cross-border area and the Oradea–Debrecen axis (European Commission, 2020: 4–7; Council of Europe, 2008: 10–18; Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, 2011: 11–18; 37–61).

The case study is illustrative rather than statistically representative. Its purpose is to identify mechanisms through which long-term cooperation can reduce symbolic and practical barriers. The analysis therefore focuses on institutional partnerships, infrastructure, education, cultural exchange and programme architecture rather than measuring individual attitudes through an original survey. This limitation is important: the paper does not claim to establish causal effects of specific projects on all dimensions of social inclusion. Instead, it triangulates policy documents, official statistics and established theoretical literature to develop a grounded analytical argument (Yin, 2018: 37–43; 50–56).

The methodological corpus was selected according to three criteria: institutional reliability, relevance to the research questions and connection to the presentation. Official European sources provide demographic and policy data; programme documents offer information about cross-border priorities; and peer-reviewed academic works supply theoretical concepts. The research also adopts a critical approach to policy language. Terms such as inclusion, resilience and cooperation can become broad labels, so the analysis asks what concrete mechanisms they imply and whose participation they enable.

The study follows an interpretive logic rather than a hypothesis-testing design. Evidence is read for convergences and tensions between normative commitments and implementation mechanisms. Particular attention is paid to the difference between formal openness and effective accessibility: a programme may be legally open to all residents while language, transport, information or socioeconomic barriers limit participation in practice. This distinction is essential when evaluating inclusion in border areas, because cross-border opportunities are not distributed evenly. The approach also recognises researcher positionality. Selection of an illustrative EU internal border foregrounds cooperation under a relatively supportive institutional framework and may understate the difficulties found at external EU borders or in areas affected by recent conflict. Future research should complement this analysis with interviews, participant observation and comparative survey data from several border regions (Denzin, 2009: 291–307; Yin, 2018: 126–132).

5. DIVERSITY AS A STRUCTURAL EUROPEAN REALITY

Official demographic evidence supports the argument that diversity is not marginal. Eurostat estimated that the EU population on 1 January 2025 included 46.7 million people born outside the Union, representing 10.4 per cent of the total population, and 18.0 million people born in another EU Member State. The distinction between citizenship and country of birth is analytically important. A person may have acquired citizenship while remaining foreign-born, and an EU citizen may live in another Member State. Both forms of mobility shape linguistic needs, education systems, labour markets and local participation (Eurostat, 2025).

The figures presented in the conference presentation were used not as a direct measure of intercultural dialogue, but as a contextual indicator. They demonstrate the scale at which European institutions and local authorities must address inclusion. The demographic structure also varies greatly between states and regions, so uniform policies are unlikely to be sufficient. Border cities may experience temporary mobility, circular migration and cross-border commuting differently from large capitals receiving long-term international migration (European Commission, 2020: 3–7).

The European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 responds to this diversity through the principle of inclusion for all. It emphasises education and training, employment and skills, health and housing, while also recognising that successful integration requires partnerships involving migrants, host communities, public authorities, civil society and social partners. The plan is relevant to border regions because inclusion is presented as a two-way process and because local and regional authorities are central to implementation (European Commission, 2020).

A mid-term review published in 2025 noted continuing pressure on public services and housing and reaffirmed integration as an investment in long-term cohesion and a means of reducing vulnerabilities. This framing is consistent with the paper's security argument. When access to schools, employment, health care and housing is unequal, cultural difference can become associated with competition and resentment. Inclusive service provision is therefore not separate from intercultural dialogue; it creates the material conditions under which dialogue can be credible (European Commission, 2025).

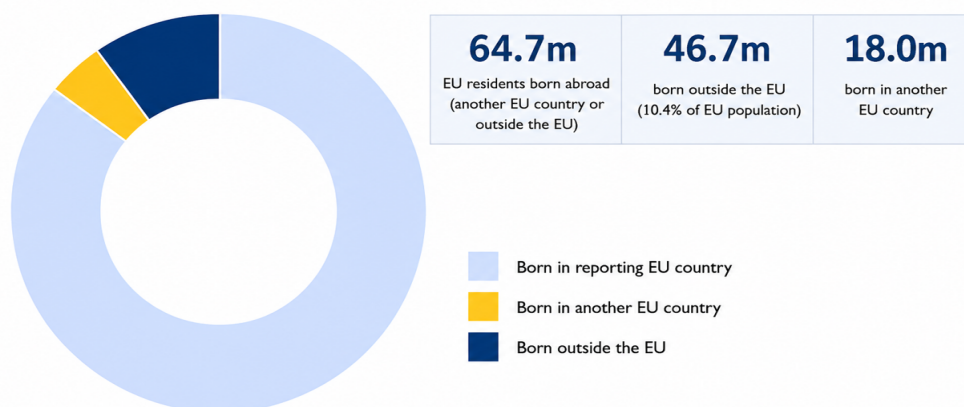
The demographic evidence should not be used to securitise migration. Numbers alone do not establish social risk, and foreign-born populations are internally diverse in legal status, skills, socioeconomic position and length of residence. A responsible

security analysis distinguishes between vulnerabilities generated by exclusion and the presence of diversity itself. The policy question is how institutions respond to demographic change while protecting rights and maintaining public trust (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 119–140; Vertovec, 2010: 88–94).

Figure 2. EU population by country of birth, 1 January 2025

Data point: diversity is a structural reality

EU population by country of birth, 1 January 2025



(Source: adapted from Eurostat (2025), "EU population diversity by citizenship and country of birth")

6. CHALLENGES: WHEN DIVERSITY IS POORLY GOVERNED

The presentation identifies four main clusters of challenges: migration pressures, nationalist discourses, stereotypes and prejudice, and historical legacies. These factors do not automatically lead to conflict, but they can weaken cohesion when institutions fail to provide fair procedures, reliable information and spaces for dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008: 16–18; Vertovec, 2010: 83–94).

Migration pressures are often experienced locally through schools, housing, health services and labour markets. The perception of pressure may be stronger than the measurable burden, especially when political actors frame newcomers as competitors or security threats. At the same time, public authorities can lose credibility when they deny genuine capacity problems. Inclusive governance requires both protection against scapegoating and transparent management of resources. Local residents and newcomers need to understand how decisions are made and how costs and benefits are distributed (European Commission, 2020: 9–17).

Nationalist discourses simplify complex border histories into narratives of ownership, victimhood and threat. In border regions, references to historical territories or minority populations may be mobilised during electoral campaigns even when everyday relations are cooperative. Such narratives can transform cultural symbols into tests of loyalty and make bilingualism or cross-border cooperation appear suspicious. The answer is not to suppress historical debate, but to encourage plural interpretations, joint research and educational practices that acknowledge different memories (Todorova, 1997: 140–160; Council of Europe, 2008: 43–44).

Stereotypes and prejudice operate through daily interactions and institutional routines. They may affect employment, housing, school expectations, media representation and access to services. Intercultural events can challenge stereotypes, but occasional festivals are insufficient when discrimination is embedded in procedures. Diversity management must therefore combine symbolic recognition with enforceable equality standards, complaint mechanisms and professional training (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017: 21–35; 54–67).

Historical legacies remain powerful because borders in South-East Europe have often changed through war, treaties and state transformation. Communities may preserve memories of displacement, forced assimilation or unequal treatment. These memories deserve recognition, yet they can also be selectively used to reproduce hostility. Cross-border dialogue is most effective when it neither demands forgetting nor turns remembrance into permanent antagonism (Council of Europe, 2008: 43–44; Todorova, 1997: 3–20).

A further challenge is the fragmentation of policy responsibilities. Cultural institutions may promote dialogue, while security institutions, schools, municipalities and social services operate with separate priorities. Without coordination, intercultural dialogue becomes isolated from the decisions that shape inclusion. The phrase used in the presentation—diversity without dialogue may become a vulnerability—should therefore be understood institutionally. Vulnerability emerges when communication, representation and equal access are weak, not from diversity as such (Council of Europe, 2008: 36–47).

7. OPPORTUNITIES: DIVERSITY AS SOCIAL CAPITAL

Diversity becomes an opportunity when it is connected to inclusive institutions and sustained daily interaction. Four mechanisms highlighted in the presentation are especially relevant: cultural diplomacy, intercultural education, cross-border cooperation and EU programmes (Putnam, 2007: 137–150: 159–167).

Cultural diplomacy at the local and regional level can create shared spaces in which communities present their heritage without reducing culture to fixed folklore. Museums, theatres, festivals, libraries and media partnerships can support bilingual or multilingual participation and joint historical reflection. Their contribution is strongest when projects are co-designed by communities rather than presented to passive audiences. Cultural diplomacy can also strengthen the external visibility of border cities and support tourism and creative industries (Council of Europe, 2008: 45–49).

Intercultural education develops the knowledge and skills required to live in diverse democratic societies. It includes language learning, critical media literacy, historical multiperspectivity, anti-discrimination education and opportunities for students to cooperate across borders. The Council of Europe's framework treats education as a central domain for learning democratic citizenship and dialogue. Schools and universities are particularly important because they can create repeated contact over time rather than one-off encounters (Council of Europe, 2008).

Cross-border cooperation transforms the border from a barrier into an interface. Joint infrastructure projects improve mobility, while institutional networks allow municipalities, universities, hospitals, emergency services and civil-society organisations to address shared problems. Cooperation also produces relational capital: officials and professionals learn whom to contact, how neighbouring systems operate and how to

negotiate differences. These relationships may become especially valuable during crises (Scott, 2012: 83–99; Rumford, 2006: 160–166).

EU programmes provide funding, legal frameworks and strategic incentives for such cooperation. Yet funding alone does not guarantee inclusion. Projects need continuity, community participation and measurable social outcomes. A new road may increase mobility without increasing trust; a cultural event may attract already engaged participants without reaching marginalised groups. Programme evaluation should therefore examine who participates, which languages are used, whether partnerships continue after funding and whether access barriers are reduced (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 37–61: 82–91).

When these mechanisms reinforce one another, diversity can generate social capital. Intercultural education prepares participants for cooperation; cultural diplomacy creates public narratives of shared belonging; infrastructure enables contact; and inclusive policies ensure that participation is not limited to privileged groups. The result is not the disappearance of differences, but an increased capacity to manage disagreement peacefully (Putnam, 2007: 137–150).

8. CASE STUDY: THE ROMANIAN–HUNGARIAN BORDER AREA

The Romanian–Hungarian border area offers a relevant illustrative case because it combines historical proximity, minority communities, EU membership, established institutional relations and a long experience of cross-border programmes. The Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar area and the Oradea–Debrecen axis are particularly significant. Both cities function as regional centres with universities, cultural institutions, health services and economic networks that extend beyond the administrative border (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 11–18; 24–30).

The case is not presented as an ideal model without tensions. Romanian–Hungarian relations have been shaped by different national narratives and by debates concerning minority rights, language and history. Nevertheless, the institutional context of the European Union has provided stable mechanisms for cooperation. The border can increasingly be approached as a shared development space, even though differences in administrative systems, funding capacity and political priorities remain (Kymlicka, 1995: 108–130; Council of Europe, 2008: 13–18).

The Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027 defines a cooperation framework for the eligible border area and supports priorities related to climate adaptation, biodiversity, health care, culture, tourism and institutional cooperation. Its importance for diversity management lies not only in explicitly cultural projects. Health, transport and environmental cooperation create practical interdependence and can increase public confidence in cross-border institutions. When residents experience concrete benefits, the neighbouring region becomes less abstract and less easily represented through stereotypes (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme and official programme priorities, 2021).

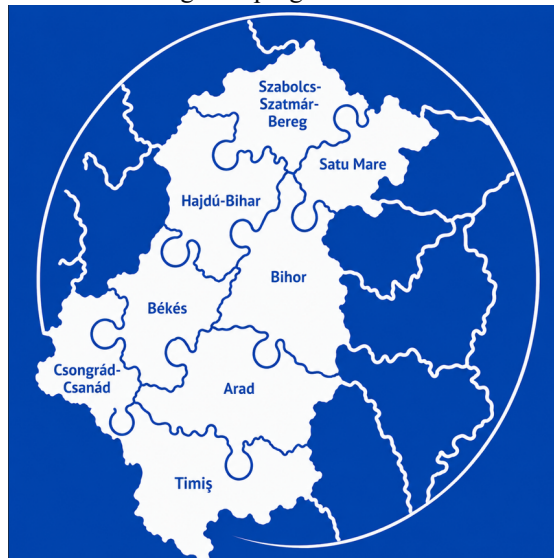
Educational and cultural exchanges are another important mechanism. Universities in Oradea and Debrecen can facilitate student mobility, joint conferences, research networks and multilingual professional communities. Schools, museums and cultural organisations can develop projects that present local history from more than one perspective. Such initiatives are especially valuable for younger generations who may inherit national narratives without having direct experience of the neighbouring society

(Council of Europe, 2008: 43–47; Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 55–61).

Infrastructure and institutional partnerships reduce practical barriers. Improved transport, coordinated services and professional networks allow residents to use the border as a resource. Yet accessibility must be examined socially as well as geographically. People with limited income, weak language skills or disabilities may benefit less from mobility unless projects include targeted measures. Inclusion therefore requires that cross-border development be designed for diverse users (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 37–61: 82–91).

The main observation is that long-term cooperation can reduce symbolic and practical barriers between communities. The word long-term is essential. Trust is cumulative and depends on repeated encounters, predictable institutions and the ability to manage disagreements. Short projects may initiate contact, but durable networks are needed to withstand political change.

Figure 3. Romanian–Hungarian programme area used in the case-study



(Source: author's elaboration based on the Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027 visual materials)

9. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis supports the main finding formulated in the presentation: effective diversity management can transform potential tensions into social capital. This conclusion is based on six linked observations (Putnam, 2006: 137–150; 159–167; Council of Europe, 2008: 16–18).

First, dialogue quality matters more than the mere existence of contact. Interaction can reinforce prejudice when participants meet under unequal conditions or when institutions tolerate discrimination. Productive dialogue requires equal dignity, clear rules, opportunities for participation and mechanisms for addressing conflict. The Council of Europe's human-rights framework is therefore not an external addition to dialogue but one of its preconditions (Council of Europe, 2008: 10–13).

Second, inclusion has both symbolic and material dimensions. Recognition of languages, traditions and identities is important, but it cannot substitute for access to education, employment, housing, health care and decision-making. Conversely, service provision that ignores identity and communication barriers may remain formally equal but practically inaccessible. Diversity management is effective when recognition and redistribution are combined (Fraser, 1995: 68–93).

Third, trust is built through institutions as well as interpersonal relationships. Citizens assess neighbouring communities partly through their experiences with schools, municipalities, border authorities, media and programme organisations. Transparent procedures and reliable services reduce uncertainty. Institutional cooperation also creates professional networks capable of responding quickly to shared problems (Putnam, 2006: 137–150; Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 82–91).

Fourth, border regions reveal the multi-level nature of inclusion. Local governments, national authorities, EU institutions, universities and civil society all influence outcomes. A policy can fail because responsibilities are unclear or because local actors lack resources to implement national commitments. Cross-border governance adds another layer, requiring coordination between different legal and administrative systems (European Commission, 2020: 18–22; Council of Europe, 2008: 36–42).

Fifth, societal security is strengthened when communities can maintain identity without interpreting other identities as existential threats. This differs from a zero-sum model in which the visibility of one language or culture is assumed to weaken another. Intercultural dialogue encourages a relational understanding of identity: communities can preserve distinctiveness while creating shared institutions and public spaces (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 119–140; Council of Europe, 2008: 13–18).

Sixth, European integration is experienced through everyday practices. Border residents may evaluate the EU less through institutional debates than through mobility, employment, infrastructure, education and access to neighbouring services. Cross-border cooperation can therefore strengthen the legitimacy of integration, but only when benefits are visible and inclusive (Scott, 2012: 83–99).

These findings also identify limits. Intercultural dialogue cannot resolve structural inequalities by itself, and cross-border projects cannot replace national minority policies or social protection. Dialogue may be instrumentalised for image-building while difficult questions are avoided. Similarly, resilience discourse can place excessive responsibility on communities to adapt without addressing institutional failures. The concept must therefore remain connected to democratic accountability and rights (Fraser, 1995: 68–93; European Commission, 2020: 4–7).

The relationship between diversity and security should be understood through prevention rather than securitisation. Preventive security seeks to reduce exclusion, misinformation and institutional mistrust before they are mobilised into polarisation. It does not label cultural groups as risks. In this sense, intercultural dialogue is strategic because it improves the capacity of societies to negotiate difference, recognise grievances and cooperate during periods of pressure (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 23–26; 119–140).

Figure 4. Synthesis of findings: policy mechanisms and expected social outcomes

Challenge		Policy response		Expected outcome
Cultural diversity	→	Intercultural education	→	Inclusion
Migration and mobility	→	Integration policies	→	Social cohesion
Historical tensions	→	Dialogue initiatives	→	Trust building
Identity differences	→	Diversity management	→	Societal resilience

(Source: author's elaboration based on Council of Europe (2008), European Commission (2020) and Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998))

10. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy logic derived from the analysis is that inclusion is not only a social goal; it is a preventive security strategy. Five recommendations follow (Council of Europe, 2008: 36–50).

First, intercultural education should be expanded across formal and non-formal settings. Curricula should include critical media literacy, minority histories, democratic citizenship and opportunities for cross-border collaboration. Language learning should be supported as a practical tool of participation rather than framed solely as a marker of national identity. Teacher training is essential because educators need methods for addressing controversial histories and prejudice (Council of Europe, 2008: 43–45).

Second, local cultural diplomacy should be strengthened. Municipalities and cultural institutions should support bilingual and co-created programmes, joint heritage initiatives and public spaces in which multiple identities are visible. Evaluation should consider whether projects involve marginalised groups, encourage sustained interaction and avoid reproducing exotic or stereotypical representations (Council of Europe, 2008: 45–49).

Third, cross-border cooperation should be designed for continuity. Programme authorities can reward partnerships that demonstrate institutional commitment beyond the funding period, include community organisations and build reusable networks. Small-scale people-to-people projects should complement major infrastructure investments because trust grows through both practical benefits and human relationships (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 82–91).

Fourth, inclusion policies for minorities and migrants should be integrated with mainstream public services. Language access, anti-discrimination procedures and participation mechanisms should be embedded in schools, health services, employment agencies and municipal administrations. The European Commission's inclusion-for-all principle provides a useful orientation, but local implementation requires adequate funding and data (European Commission, 2020: 7–20).

Fifth, border-region governance should incorporate participatory monitoring. Authorities should collect disaggregated data where legally and ethically appropriate,

consult communities regularly and publish accessible information on project outcomes. Monitoring must protect privacy and avoid turning identities into rigid administrative categories. Qualitative feedback is needed alongside indicators to understand how residents experience inclusion (European Commission, 2020: 20–22).

A cross-cutting recommendation concerns communication. Institutions should explain the benefits, costs and limits of cooperation honestly. Overly celebratory narratives can undermine trust when residents encounter unresolved problems. Public communication should acknowledge disagreement while showing how democratic procedures and cross-border institutions manage it (Council of Europe, 2008: 36–40; 50).

Figure 5. Policy recommendations



(Source: author's elaboration based on the policy recommendations derived from Council of Europe (2008), European Commission (2020) and the Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027)

11. CONCLUSION

This article has examined intercultural dialogue and diversity management in border areas through the combined perspectives of European Studies, Security Studies and Intercultural Communication. Its central argument is that diversity is neither inherently a threat nor automatically an advantage. Outcomes depend on the quality of governance, the distribution of resources, opportunities for participation and the capacity of institutions to support interaction based on equal dignity.

South-East European border regions are especially significant because ethnic, linguistic, religious and historical layers intersect with contemporary mobility and European integration. These regions can experience polarisation when nationalist narratives, stereotypes and unequal access are left unaddressed. They can also become laboratories of integration when cultural diplomacy, education, institutional cooperation and EU programmes create repeated and meaningful interaction.

The Romanian–Hungarian border case illustrates how long-term cooperation can reduce symbolic and practical barriers. The Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar and Oradea–Debrecen relationships show that infrastructure, education, culture and institutional networks are mutually reinforcing. The case also demonstrates that cross-border cooperation must be socially inclusive and durable if it is to generate trust.

The societal-security perspective adds a strategic dimension. Security is not only about controlling borders or protecting institutions; it is also about the capacity of

communities to coexist peacefully, preserve identity and maintain confidence in a shared democratic framework. Intercultural dialogue contributes to this capacity by preventing difference from being transformed into existential threat narratives.

The future of Europe will depend not only on institutions at the supranational level, but also on the capacity of diverse communities to communicate, cooperate and build trust. Border regions are where this capacity is tested most visibly. Managing diversity through rights, participation and dialogue is therefore a practical requirement for social inclusion, democratic resilience and sustainable European integration.

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